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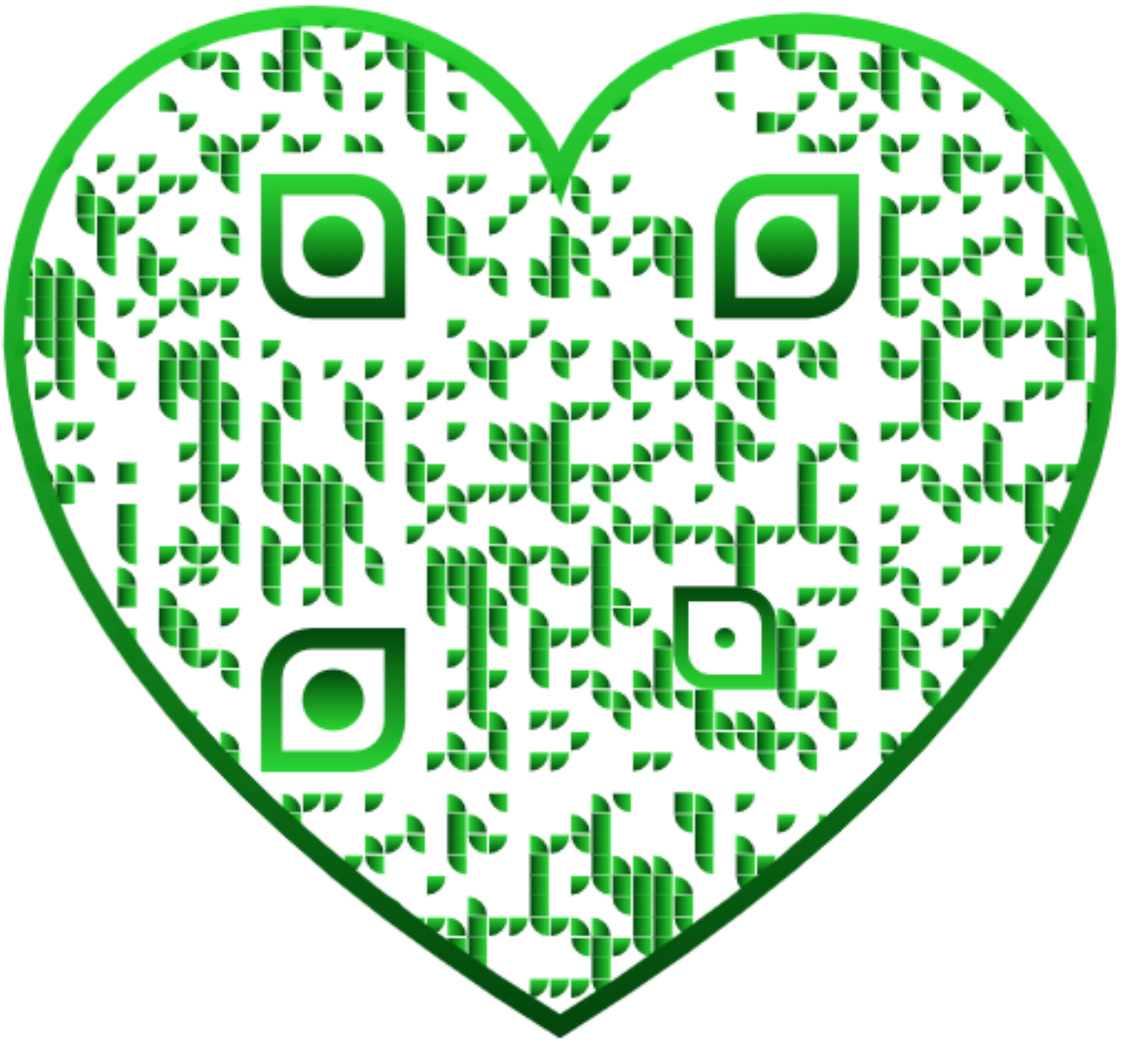

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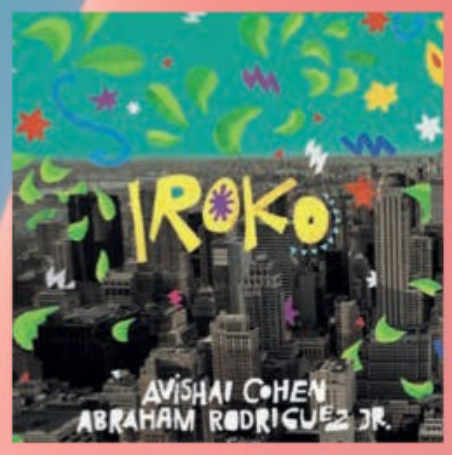

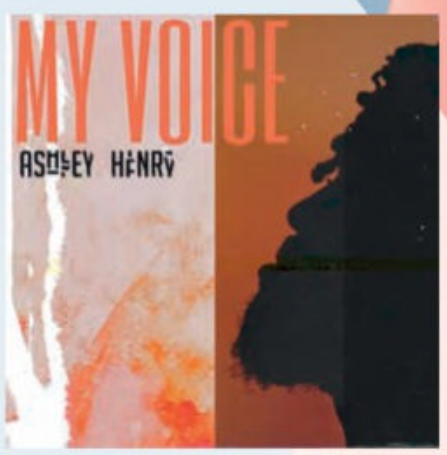

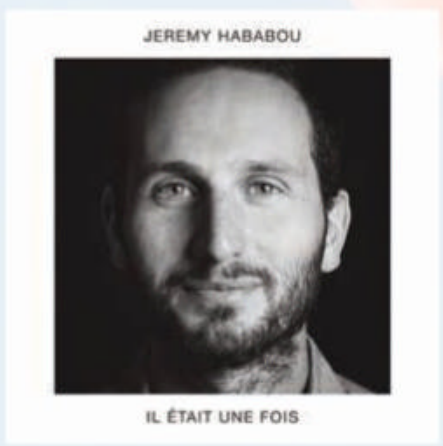

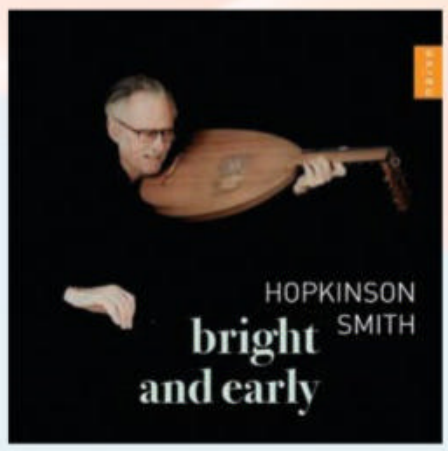

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SOUNDS OF AMERICA

A special eight-page section focusing on recent recordings from the US and Canada

Burwasser

'Flights of Imagination'
Catching Fireflies[a]. Flux[b]. Puck's Game[c]. A Well-Traveled Road[d]. Whirlwind[e]
[e]Arcadian Winds; [c]Sirius Quartet; [b]Concordia Orchestra / Marin Alsop; [a]Seattle Symphony Orchestra / Gerard Schwarz; [d]Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra / Robert Stankovsky
Navona (NV6512 • 44')
Recorded [d]1995, [a]1997, [b]1999, [e]2016, [c]2019.
From [b]NV5895 (3/13); [a]NV5969; [e]NV6057; [c]NV6315 (2/21)

This attractive, well-played album gathers together in one place five disparate works by Daniel Burwasser (*b*1960) previously issued separately in mixed-composer Navona issues. A graduate of Temple and Rutgers Universities, Burwasser studied with several distinguished teachers including Charles Wuorinen and David Del Tredici.

Burwasser's music is straightforward in melodic and harmonic appeal, as can be heard in his brilliant orchestral toccata *Catching Fireflies* (1997). Resonant of Prokofiev, this virtuoso concert-opener (or encore) received a splendid performance by the Seattle Symphony Orchestra under Gerard Schwarz on Navona's 'Luminescence' album in 2014. The brief wind quintet *Whirlwind* (2016) shows no falling-off of Burwasser's powers of invention and entertainment in its three compact movements. The title is a misnomer, intended only to show his 'interest in momentum and expressive concision', wholly successfully. The tone poem *A Well-Traveled Road* (1992), the earliest and largest work here (and the oldest recording), is curiously more elusive expressively for all the euphony of style. Not so the string-orchestral essay *Flux*, which so impressed Donald Rosenberg in this fine performance from Concordia under Marin Alsop.

I reviewed the recording of *Puck's Game* (2019) on the Sirius Quartet's 'Playing on the Edge 2' album, describing it as 'the pick of the bunch … a vividly scored, rhythmic tour de force that catches the mercurial quality of the sprite from *The Tempest* to a tee'. I stand by that assessment and would suggest it as the pick here, too, though the sheer exuberance of *Catching Fireflies* is winning. The five works were recorded at five different locations – thousands of miles apart – by five different teams between 1995 and 2019; Melanie Montgomery's mastering for this portrait album has smoothed out the sonic wrinkles very adeptly while retaining degrees of individuality (spaciousness for the orchestras, somewhat closer for the chamber ensembles) for each recording. A shame the album is a touch underfilled, but do give this a try.

Guy Rickards

Mazzoli

Dark with Excessive Bright (two versions[a/b]). Orpheus Undone[c]. Sinfonia (for Orbiting Spheres)[c]. These Worlds in Us[c]. Vespers for Violin[d]
[abd]Peter Herresthal *vn* [b]members of the **[c]Arctic Philharmonic Orchestra / [bc]Tim Weiss; [a]Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra / James Gaffigan**
BIS (BIS2572 SACD • 66')

Missy Mazzoli writes so brilliantly for the violin in *Dark with Excessive Bright* that it is hard to believe the piece began life as a double-bass concerto. Mazzoli had felt that the 'impossibility' of the phrase from *Paradise Lost* was 'a strangely accurate way to describe the dark but heart-rending sound of the double bass itself'. Adapted at the request of Peter Herresthal and achieved by what the composer calls 'flipping the original work upside-down', the solo violin rising radiantly above the Bergen Philharmonic's cosmic vistas seems an entirely appropriate, intriguingly different response to the quote. It is somewhat disappointing that instead of the double-bass original Herresthal returns in an alternative arrangement for violin, string quartet and double bass, the consolation being that it may be even more sumptuously ethereal than its own original version.

Mazzoli immerses the listener in all sorts of excellent sounds in her *Sinfonia (for Orbiting Spheres)*, including a hurdy-gurdy 'flung into space', as if the theory of relativity were being applied to music. There is a sense of personal pride in *These Worlds in Us*, a tribute to the composer's father, and Herresthal stars again in *Vespers*, the absorbing tour de force for violin and electronics that was nominated in 2019 for a Grammy Award as Best Classical Composition.

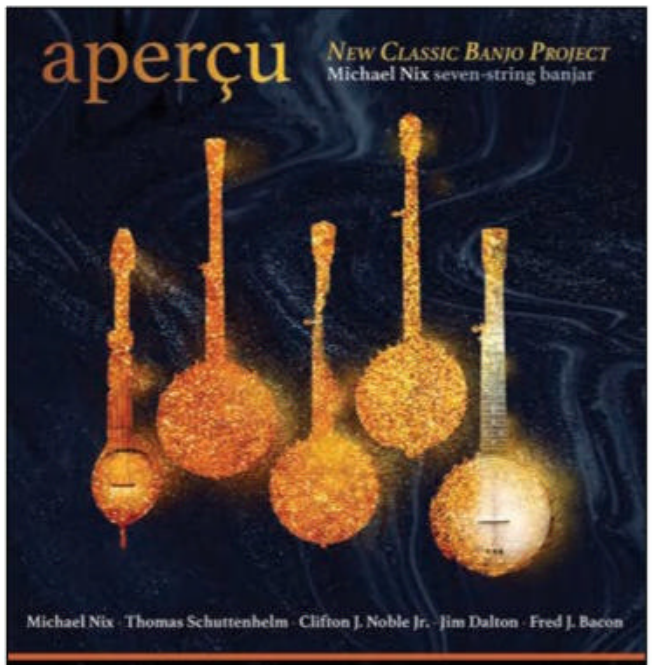
The Arctic Philharmonic move Mazzoli's blocks of imagination with wonderful balletic grace through the 16-minute frieze of Orpheus in the immediate aftermath of Eurydice's death, an orchestral suite commissioned by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra with obvious origins in a ballet Mazzoli created for the National Ballet of Canada in 2019.

Laurence Vittes

Wiemann

I Give You My Home
Aliana de la Guardia *sop* **Philipp A Stäudlin** *sax* **Mike Williams** *perc* **Guerilla Opera**
Navona (NV6513 • 37')
Includes synopsis

Although advertised as a chamber opera – even a 'site-specific' chamber opera (of which more later) – *I Give You My Home* (2021) is properly a monodrama for soprano, saxophone and percussion, accompanied by some discreet electronics (the operator uncredited by Navona). Its subject is the Bostonian landscape architect and peace activist Rose Standish Nichols (1872-1960). The temporal setting is – presumably, given a reference to America's inclusion in the Second World War – the late 1940s or '50s, to represent the point at which Nichols bequeathed her family



APERÇU
MICHAEL NIX

APERÇU from composer and banjo innovator **Michael Nix** challenges listeners to reimagine the banjo as an instrument. Brought to life by Nix's 7-string Banjar, the album incorporates various folk and classical styles to forge a newfangled genre: New Classical Banjo.

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michaelnixmusic.com
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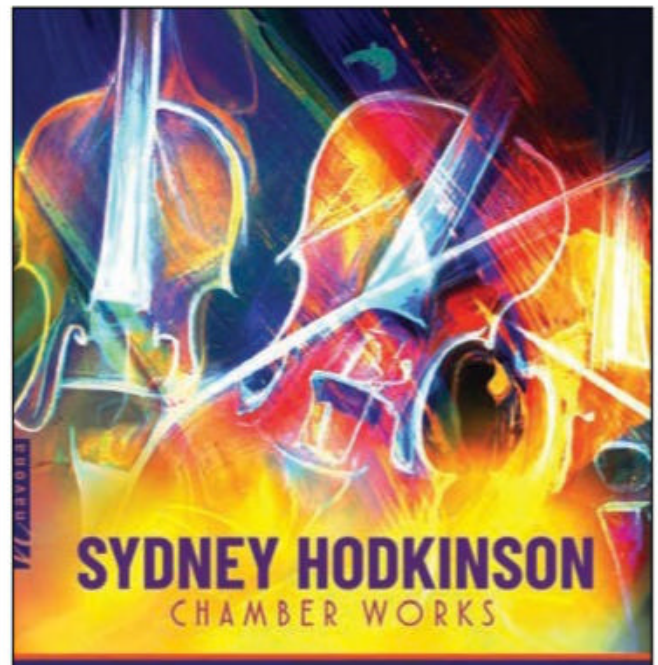

CHAMBER WORKS
SYDNEY HODKINSON

With works written in dedication to family members, loved ones, and friends, **SYDNEY HODKINSON: CHAMBER WORKS** brings four live recordings of the late composer's string quartets and a trio to life with performances from the Benda Quartet and the Jupiter Quartet.

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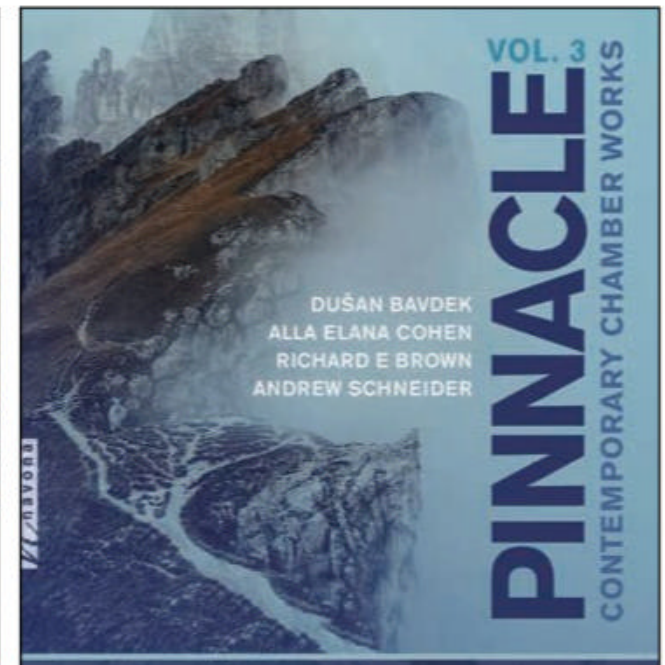

PINNACLE VOL 3
DUŠAN BAVDEK, ALLA ELANA COHEN, RICHARD E BROWN, ANDREW SCHNEIDER

PINNACLE VOL 3 highlights the melodic, emotive, and dramatic styles of today's contemporary chamber music. Leveraging raw thematic material and colorful musical portraits, the composers and performers keep the fire burning while bringing a fresh and unique tone to the series.

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BEN MARINO, FERGUS JOHNSTON, JOUNGMIN LEE, RAFFAELE MARCELLINO, JOSEF SUK

LEGENDS AND LIGHT VOL. 3 is an ambitious collection of new works performed by the **Janáček Philharmonic Ostrava**. Inspired by art, mystical experiences, and the wonders of our universe, this album casts a spotlight on the compositional innovation and orchestral ferocity of today's composers and performers.

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STEVEN MASI

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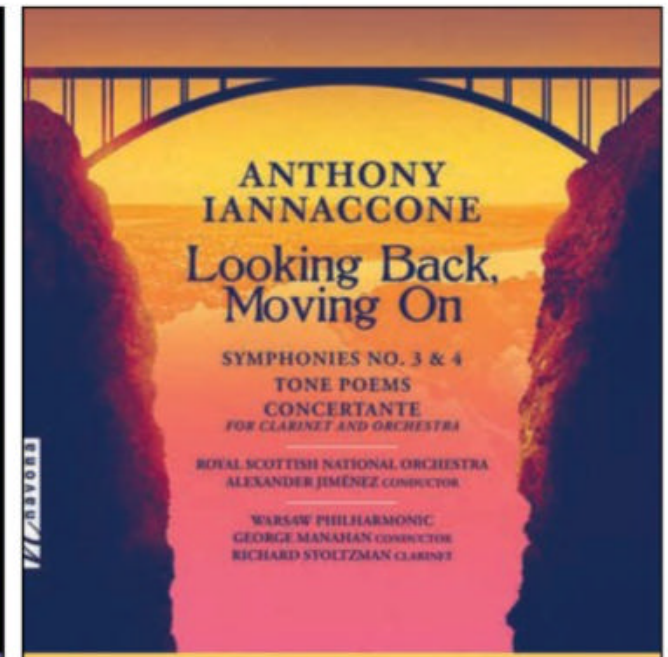

LOOKING BACK, MOVING ON
ANTHONY IANNACCONE

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Sarah Cahill plays a wide-ranging selection of music composed by women on the final volume of a series distinctive for its finesse and conviction

PHOTOGRAPHY: MIRANDA SANBORN

home to become the Nichols House Museum, for which and in which the monodrama was premiered in March 2022. A film version was also made, ideally for cinema release, which I have not seen.

Cast in a single act divided into six brief scenes, the bulk of *I Give You My Home* is a reminiscence of key points in Nichols's life, from her early education and travels to Europe (scene 2) to her involvement with the Women's International League (of which she was a founder member) and attendance at post-Great War peace conferences in scene 5. Scenes 3 and 4 focus on her career as a landscape architect, inspired initially by her Uncle Gus (the eminent sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, 1848-1907), and her development of formally symmetrical but tranquil garden designs. Topping and tailing the whole are two brief scenes depicting the set-up for the bequest and the final grant.

The concept is a gentle one, charting the travails, successes (if not a suffragist herself, Nichols campaigned for women's rights) and disappointments: as in Woodrow Wilson's neglecting to admit her into the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, or America's involvement in the Second World War. Lasting a little under the target timing (according to the composer's website) of 40 minutes, this finely produced recording captures the wistful essence of the whole. Aliana de la Guardia sings (and occasionally speaks) the role of Rose very nicely and Philipp A Stäudlin and Mike Williams provide exemplary support. Beth Wiemann's score is lyrical if melodically rather grey: what the piece cries out for is a truly memorable tune or moment to really hit home. Williams's menacing intimations of war at the start of scene 5 (the only scene with any real hint of drama) are beautifully done but just not enough.

Guy Rickards

'The Future is Female, Vol 3'

'At Play'
Ali-Zadeh Music for Piano **Bacewicz** Scherzo **Chaminade** Thème varié, Op 98 **Chen Yi** Guessing **Harris Baiocchi** Piano Poems **Kendall** On the Chequer'd Field Array'd **Montgeroult** Piano Sonata No 9, Op 5 No 3 **Oliveros** Quintuplets Play Pen **Shirazi** Albumblatt
Sarah Cahill *pf*
First Hand (FHR133 • 80')

The third and final volume of Sarah Cahill's 'The Future is Female' offers a chronologically wide-ranging selection of music composed by women. The intrepid San Francisco Bay-area pianist champions female composers in both her live performances and recordings. Notwithstanding a

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reputation as an avant-garde specialist, she moves comfortably in this series from the present day back to the 18th century, underscoring her dedication to 'a corrective towards rebalancing the repertoire' with respect to gender. Her project features works by women from around the globe, several of them commissioned by Cahill.

She performs the older compositions with similar acuity, finesse and conviction. The proto-Mendelssohnian Sonata No 9 by Hélène de Montgeroult (1764-1836) – a French contemporary of Beethoven who had the distinction of being the first professor of piano at the Paris Conservatoire when it opened in 1795 – ripples with fluency and harmonic sensitivity. In Cécile Chaminade's attractive *Thème varié* (1895), Cahill delivers the elaborate figurations and thick chordal writing with impressive control.

One highlight of the album is the Scherzo (1934) by Grażyna Bacewicz, arguably the most gifted female composer of her time. Written in a neoclassical style, after her studies with Nadia Boulanger, it is dispatched playfully, the pianist savouring the crisp dissonances while maintaining a firm pulse.

The contemporary works span a diversity of styles, from the insouciance and tonal charm of the four *Piano Poems* by Regina Harris Baiocchi (*b*1956) to the hypnotic tracery of Franghiz Ali-Zadeh (*b*1947), whose prepared piano evokes the timbres of a dulcimer. Still more engrossing is the *Albumblatt* of Aida Shirazi (*b*1987), which deploys a variety of outré techniques including scratching, strumming and muting the strings to fashion a glittering sonic canvas. **Stephen Cera**

The Opus 76 Quartet, Kansas City

Our monthly guide to North American ensembles

Founded 2018
Home Midwest Trust Center at Johnson County Community College, KS

What's the definition of a grown-up city? The answer of an Australian friend who had transplanted to Kansas City was, I remember, 'good sushi'. For the violinist Keith Stanfield, by contrast, the answer might be a resident string quartet. And with Zsolt Eder, Ashley Stanfield and Daniel Ketter in Opus 76, he has triumphantly brought this about. Their recent debut at Carnegie Hall was a fine reflection of their five-year journey from regional emergence to national recognition.

Before 2018 the city had, beyond those who gigged at weddings, no string quartet. That seemed almost incredible to Londoner Stanfield, used to densely crowded cultural spaces. 'It was like a gift from God … an open goal,' he says, deftly switching metaphors. Sporting images spring readily to his lips; in a previous chapter of life he was a football (soccer) player, representing Western Samoa in the 2010 World Cup qualifiers.

One suspects that his outsider status and jaunty adaptability helped him to see things afresh and cut across the existing fiefdoms in this rapidly expanding city. For Stanfield it is, or could be, a 'mini-Chicago'. Having spent several years in financial services, he gives off a savvy, businesslike air, and the economics of classical performance is something that he is very ready to talk about.

The first two years were a kind of apprenticeship of sorts for the quartet, during which they learnt as much repertoire as possible. Forward-facing, they developed online performances well before Covid, meaning that they had an infrastructure already in place during the lean years. Two people in particular lent them civic legitimacy: Emily Behrmann, then Director of the Midwest Trust Center, a suburban arts venue, and Ramona Pansegrau, who hired them to accompany the Kansas City Ballet. When you are starting up, you need some gatekeepers to actually open the gates.

Their novel Discovery Concerts, completely free of charge and explicitly open to families, established them as a familiar local brand. 'Get people to turn up': it's as simple as that. And if you play what Stanfield calls 'sure-fire composers', people will. Through their Educational Residency at the Youth Symphony, they are now training a new generation of quartets to run their own discovery concerts.

There's a refreshing absence of angst in Stanfield's vision of where classical music is headed. An absence of snobbishness, too. He's happy to work with the entertainment platform 'Fever', who create the Instagram-friendly ambience for their Candelight Concert series – Vivaldi-meets-Las-Vegas – as long as he gets to choose the programme. A midweek luxury date night for couples: well, what's wrong with that? Maybe, he reflects, going to a concert is like choosing a 'mechanical watch': it's about the beauty and the craft.

But social media smarts belies the deeper story. Through Opus 76's initiative Music Making Minds, Stanfield is pushing further into his Dostoevskian vision of beauty saving the world. Classical music, he sees, is an extraordinary generator of empathy. There are so few places, he points out, other than concerts, where you have to hear what somebody else says, at length and without giving feedback. At a gallery, if you don't like a work of art, you can just walk out. At a concert, you have to stay: you're forced to engage. This, he sees, is constructive in a poetic way, allowing you to experience life from a different perspective. 'We all need to become better listeners,' he says. And Opus 76 are certainly helping a city do just that. **Hilary Stroh**

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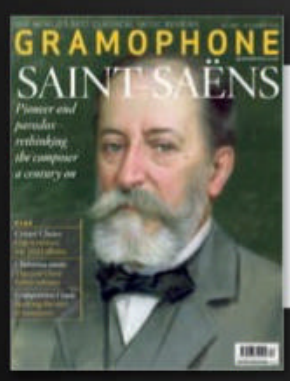

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A LETTER FROM *Montreal*

Arthur Kaptainis reports on a Mahler-dominated orchestral season and two new operas on the Montreal stage

Mahler, Mahler, Mahler: Rafael Payare and the Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal have turned this master into a mission, almost an industry. It is not as though Payare's two most recent predecessors as music director — Kent Nagano and Charles Dutoit — had no affinity for Mahler. But 2022-23 raised the ante by offering the Second Symphony (*Resurrection*) on the season-opening programme, the Third as a closer and the Fifth as the highlight of a tour in March that included a self-promoted appearance at Carnegie Hall. Add performances of the Fifth last summer at the Lanaudière Festival and in Korea, plus a recording for Pentatone (see page 43), and you have an ensemble that might be able to play the *Adagietto* from memory.

The beat goes on in 2023-24. Mahler's First Symphony is heard in September and the Seventh in January as an unusual winter blues-chaser. We do not know yet whether these works will be recorded but it is worth noting that neither is in the Pentatone catalogue. If any other label feels like adding a Second to its present offerings, the September performance that formed the basis of a webcast (nla) struck this listener as entirely release-worthy from the standpoint of both exactitude and inspiration.

> Both orchestras perform in the acoustically luminous Maison Symphonique. It can be argued each is better for the competition

The OSM dedication to blockbuster programming extends beyond Mahler. Next season's line-up includes Payare-led performances of Messiaen's *Turangalîla-Symphonie* and Bruckner's Fourth. The Shostakovich Tenth of last October is followed next March by the Eighth. The season begins with *The Rite of Spring* and ends with the Symphony No 3 (*Organ*) by Saint-Saëns (who famously walked out of the Paris premiere of the Stravinsky). Nor are earlier masterpieces overlooked, although Payare's only Beethoven assignments next season will be the Symphony No 1 and Violin Concerto with concertmaster Andrew Wan as soloist. (Nagano, who remains popular, brings the *Eroica* and Christoph Eschenbach comes with the Seventh.) The canon has clearly not fallen out of favour in Montreal. Indeed, Payare shows limited personal interest in the US counter-canon. He will, however, make room for the Symphony No 7 of the German Romantic, Emilie Mayer (1812-83). Roderick Cox, an American conductor, has been engaged to lead the *Negro Folk Symphony* by William Levi Dawson.

There are also contemporary Canadian works on the docket – the Saint-Saëns is coupled with a commission for organ and orchestra by the veteran Montreal composer Denis Gougeon – but a richer source of novelty is music of Latin American nations, including Payare's native Venezuela. A programme in April coupled a new piece by another Montrealer, Ana Sokolović, with a semi-staged performance of the iconically nationalistic *Cantata criolla* by Antonio Estévez (1916-88). Payare keeps the Chœur de l'OSM (Andrew Megill, director) busy.

Something, then, for almost everyone, including fans of pop and world music, among whom I do not count myself. Of course, there are alternatives to the OSM, first among them the Orchestre Métropolitain, which I discussed in some detail in the May issue. Led by a certain Yannick Nézet-Séguin, the OM will add the Sixth Symphony to the Mahlerian mix in 2024. Both orchestras perform in the acoustically luminous Maison Symphonique and attract similar crowds (linguistic divisions having largely dissipated). It can be argued that each is better for the competition, just as Analekta founder François Mario Labbé once commented to me that the existence of two internationally distributed labels in Montreal (the other being ATMA Classique) was a fundamentally healthy thing. Both have been absorbed by larger companies (Analekta by Outhere Music and ATMA by Ad Literam) but remain active as platforms for local talent. One offbeat Analekta enterprise is a Schubert cycle by the pianist Mathieu Gaudet, whose day job is as an emergency room physician. ATMA will continue its YNS/Orchestre Métropolitain Sibelius cycle by recording the Fifth Symphony.

Quebeckers are traditionally understood to be partial to *l'art lyrique*. The Opéra de Montréal accommodates them with a mix of new and old. While the present season concludes with *Madama Butterfly* and the next opens with *Le nozze di Figaro*, there are plenty of off-Broadway attractions, including, last March, Osvaldo Golijov's flamenco-tinged 2005 opera *Ainadamar*. Next season includes the premiere of *La Reine-garçon*, a joint commission of the OdM and the Canadian Opera Company that will explore the widely accepted lesbian identity of Queen Christina of Sweden. The creative pair of Julien Bilodeau (music) and Michel Marc Bouchard (words) are reunited after what was taken to be the public success last November of *La beauté du monde*, an opera based on the efforts of a pair of French officials to evacuate the Louvre in advance of Nazi looting. I filed one of the few dissenting reviews. Nor was my scepticism widely shared after the premiere in February of *La Flambeau*, an opera with voodoo elements by the Haitian-born composer David Bontemps as presented by the Orchestre Classique de Montréal. People here just like opera.

This synopsis does not touch on the great quantity of chamber music available in and around Montreal, ranging from Baroque to contemporary, or mention the annual Concours Musical International de Montréal, which upheld its international credentials in April by admitting precisely one Canadian (with a co-affiliation to Hong Kong) to the list of 24 violinists contesting the first round. Payare was scheduled to conduct the OSM in the finals.

As all of the above suggests, a full recovery from the Covid nightmare is under way in Montreal, maybe accomplished. All those essays about how classical music is changed forever? In the trash can, along with our masks. Live music is back. *C'est beau*!

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What lies ahead for classical recording?

Firstly, my personal thanks to the many of you who have shared in the celebratory spirit of our centenary and written in with memories of *Gramophone*. It's been very moving to read of the significant part the magazine has played in so many readers' listening lives. What's been most wonderful, however, is that so many letters have felt like part of a dialogue, an expression of a shared appreciation of what it means to engage with recording. Just as listening to music is an active rather than passive pursuit, so, I hope, is reading commentary on it.

I've just returned from an industry event in Vienna called Audio Classique – two days of hearing about what lies ahead for recording. From the conversations I had with labels I can happily assure you that their plans are just as inspired and inspiring as ever: albums on the horizon involve both known names thinking creatively, and also artists unfamiliar to me but backed by some of the industry's most forward-thinking A&R executives – always an encouraging sign.

As part of the event, I chaired a panel discussion exploring the place of the traditional album in an age where streaming plays an ever greater role. My starting point was: why does a format rooted in the physical era continue to have such resonance, such that not only do artists devote substantial time and money to it, but organisations such as last year's *Gramophone* Recording of the Year winners the Bayerische Staatsoper are even launching new labels? Debate ranged widely, but it was quite clear that the idea of a long listen, over a span sufficient to allow space for pairings or programmes to illuminate concepts or contrasting works, continues

to capture the imagination. Furthermore, it also highlighted the extent to which album tracks provide crucial building blocks for playlists – whether our own *Gramophone* Listening Room or those found on the likes of the new Apple Music Classical app. Like radio programmes, thoughtfully curated playlists can offer enjoyable listening experiences in their own right, as well as excellent 'ways in' for explorers. Elsewhere, we learnt that while post-Covid concert audiences have sadly settled at a lower level than before, where that gap *is* being filled is by younger audiences who, while the world was at a standstill, discovered classical music through streaming. There are many ways to listen to recordings, and we should welcome them all.

Meanwhile, we also learnt that the classical albums that see greatest sales success are often those featuring contemporary composers. The past century of recording may have been heavily weighted towards historical works, but prior to that, most music was modern. Perhaps the future will offer a healthier balance between the two. By the time you read this, global audiences will have been focused on the Coronation of King Charles III, featuring music both old and brand new, performed by artists of extraordinary ability – what better message to send about our musical life than that? Overall, the message I took away from Vienna is that in uncertain times nobody is recording music for the sake of it. High costs and a vast catalogue concentrate the mind, and the result is release schedules full of purpose and creativity. I can't wait to hear – and share – the outcome.

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THIS MONTH'S CONTRIBUTORS

Tim Ashley • Richard Bratby • Edward Breen • Liam Cagney • Stephen Cera • Alexandra Coghlan • Rob Cowan (consultant reviewer) • Jeremy Dibble • Jed Distler • Adrian Edwards • Andrew Farach-Colton • Fabrice Fitch • Marina Frolova-Walker • Charlotte Gardner • David Gutman • Christian Hoskins • Arthur Kaptainis • Lindsay Kemp • Andrew Mellor • Jeremy Nicholas • Richard Osborne • Mark Pullinger • Peter J Rabinowitz • Guy Rickards • Patrick Rucker • Edward Seckerson • Mark Seow • Hugo Shirley • Pwyll ap Siôn • David Patrick Stearns • Hilary Stroh • David Threasher • David Vickers • Laurence Vittes • Richard Whitehouse • William Yeoman

'Hearing about the AAM's ambitious Handel For All project was like getting a shot of optimism straight into the vein,' says **ALEXANDRA COGHLAN**, who writes about the project in this issue. 'The confidence and conviction it takes to launch a vast series like this at such a dark moment in UK culture is deeply inspiring and gives me hope for the musical future.'

'Our little West Country household rang to the strains of Vaughan Williams's Oboe Concerto for years as I battled with it as a young oboe student,' writes **DAVID THREASHER**, the author of this issue's Collection feature. 'Revisiting the available recordings for this feature has been an exercise as much in nostalgia as in music criticism.'

'I first met Dobrinka Tabakova while working at Schott Music,' says **HATTIE BUTTERWORTH**, who writes this month's Contemporary Composers feature. 'Delving into her music was an experience like no other, and I have been continually inspired by her unique sense of voice. She knows what she wants to say, which makes listening to her music such a joy.'

"*Gramophone*, which has been serving the classical music world since 1923, is first and foremost a monthly review magazine, delivered today in both print and digital formats. It boasts an eminent and knowledgeable panel of experts, which reviews the full range of classical music recordings. Its reviews are completely independent. In addition to reviews, its interviews and features help readers to explore in greater depth the recordings that the magazine covers, as well as offer insight into the work of composers and performers. It is *the* magazine for the classical record collector, as well as for the enthusiast starting a voyage of discovery."

COVER PHOTOGRAPHS: STEFAN HOEDERATH, FOXBRUSH.CO.UK, VAUGHAN WILLIAMS FOUNDATION, BENJAMIN EALOVEGA

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Dip Into Lake George for a festival like no other

Head to the spectacular Adirondacks this summer to experience wonderful concerts, open rehearsals, experimental collaborations and engaging talks – or simply to find solace and calm surrounded by beautiful mountains and music

'Lake George is without comparison, the most beautiful water I ever saw.' So wrote Thomas Jefferson at the height of summer in 1791, gazing across the lake known as the pearl of the Adirondacks – the spectacular mountain range that leads all the way from the heart of New York State to the Canadian border.

The violin-playing President isn't the only musician to have been inspired by Lake George and its surroundings, which boasts some of the wildest terrain in the East of the USA. As New York City sprang up, the area quickly became a favourite retreat for artists, musicians and writers in need of a convenient escape from the bustle of the metropolis.

Singer-composer power couple Louise and Sidney Homer made their home amid Lake George's dense forests and still waters in the early 1900s. They were soon followed by star of the Metropolitan Opera, soprano Marcella Sembrich, who built a studio on the lake's west shore that remains virtually unchanged today (it is open to the public, as both a museum and performance space).

As summer begins to wane and the light sharpens in August, the foliage around Lake George begins to reveal an unmatched palette of oranges, reds and yellows. It is the perfect time to fall into the embrace of the Adirondacks, whether hill walking, hiking, canoeing, backcountry camping, exploring the town's cutesy shops and boutiques – or sampling a music festival that is rapidly reinventing the meaning of the phrase 'cultural destination.'

Lake George Music Festival is on a mission to re-imagine the concert experience and build audiences for classical and experimental music in the 21st century. It looks to the future by taking inspiration from the past – in particular, from the generations of musicians who have found solace and calm in this unspeakably beautiful place, and had their creativity fired as a result.

Since 2011, Lake George Music Festival has offered experiences like no other such event. It combines traditional classical music with experimental music and visionary collaborations, ignoring genre boundaries wherever possible. Experiences range from open rehearsals to receptions and informal talks, and of course, concerts from our own ensembles – the Lake George Festival Chamber Players and Symphony Orchestra. Mozart and Mahler rub shoulders with Xenakis and Reich, while our Festival Symphony Orchestra annually invites progressive and curious colleagues from the realms of rock or electronica to help build its annual Sounds of Our Time series.

Highlights of this season's orchestral series at the historic Carriage House on the grounds of the Fort William Henry Hotel include works by Saint-Saëns, Dvořák, Sibelius and the world premiere of a newly commissioned symphony by Sheridan Seyfried. Details of all the recitals, chamber music performances and orchestral concerts scheduled can be found on the festival website.

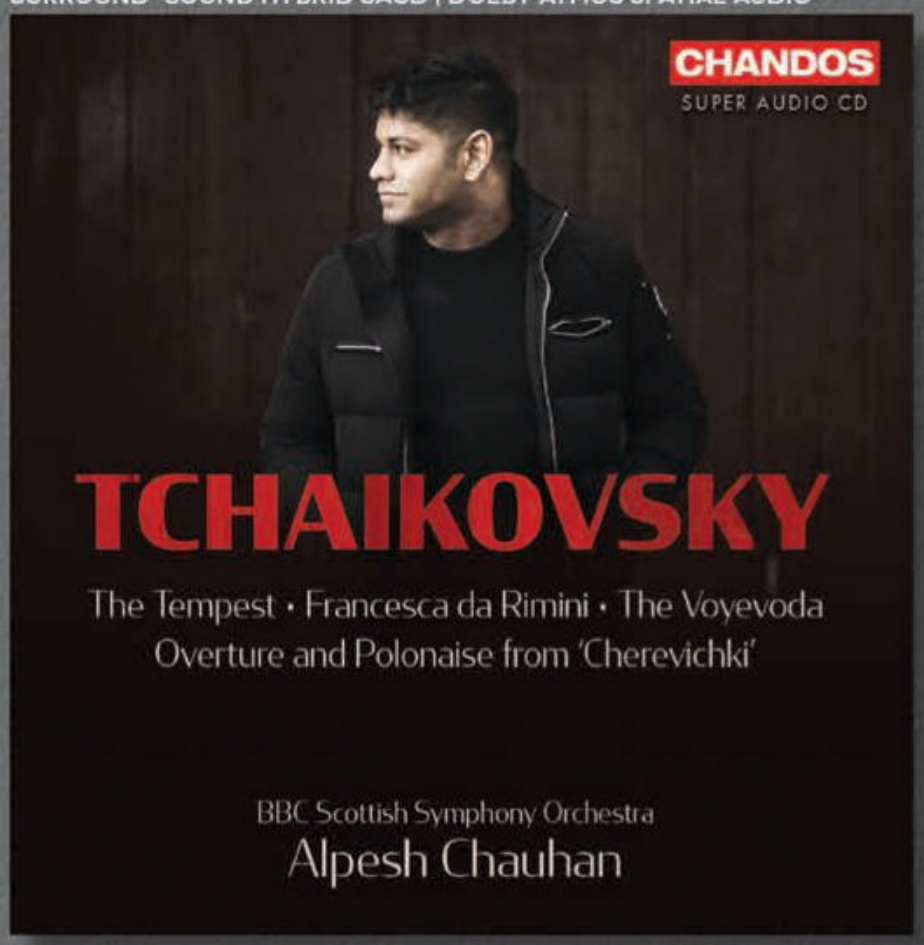
What can't be adequately described there, or even here, is the spirit of openness that characterises this festival – one in which an atmosphere of friendliness, approachability and exchange between musicians, residents and visitors underlines everything that happens. Consider yourself invited to this magical corner of the Adirondacks from August 6-17 this year, where you'll soon learn why creative minds have flocked here for a century and more – and why they feel refreshed and inspired when they do.
lakegeorgemusicfestival.com

PHOTOGRAPHY: CREDIT INFO TO BE SUPPLIED

CHANDOS
THE SOUND OF CLASSICAL

JUNE RELEASES

SURROUND-SOUND HYBRID SACD | DOLBY ATMOS SPATIAL AUDIO



RECORDING OF THE MONTH

TCHAIKOVSKY
THE TEMPEST, FRANCESCA DA RIMINI, THE VOYEVODA, OVERTURE AND POLONAISE FROM 'CHEREVICHKI'

BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra | Alpesh Chauhan

Alpesh Chauhan presents his début recording for Chandos with this collection of symphonic fantasies by Tchaikovsky, the first in a projected Tchaikovsky series. The BBC SSO plays with spirit and finesse for their Associate Conductor. The album was recorded in Glasgow City Halls in Surround Sound and is available as a Hybrid SACD and in Dolby Atmos spatial audio.

CHSA 5300

ERIC COATES
ORCHESTRAL WORKS, VOL. 3

BBC Philharmonic | John Wilson

This third volume of John Wilson's Coates series offers the *Cinderella* Phantasy, the suites *The Three Men* and *The Three Elizabeths*, as well as *Last Love* and *Sweet Seventeen*. Two marches complete the programme: *Television March* and *The Dam Busters*.

BERLIN STORIES
MENDELSSOHN, JUON, SKALKOTTAS

Trio Gaspard

Berlin Stories is the first in a new series of recordings by Trio Gaspard, focussed on different cultural capitals and composers associated with them. The album features three composers who lived and worked in Berlin for a period of their lives. All the members of Trio Gaspard have lived or still live in Berlin and the album expresses their love and admiration for this endlessly fascinating and invigorating metropolis.

SURROUND-SOUND HYBRID SACD

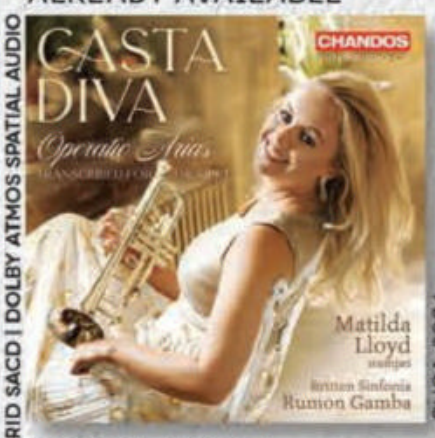
ICHMOURATOV
PIANO CONCERTO, VIOLA CONCERTO NO. 1

Jean-Philippe Sylvestre | Elvira Misbakhova | LSO | Airat Ichmouratov

Airat Ichmouratov conducts the London Symphony Orchestra in this recording of two of his major works, the third album by Chandos of works by this outstanding composer. The concertos are performed here by the soloists who premièred them. Recorded at LSO St Luke's, in London, in Surround Sound.

ALREADY AVAILABLE

SURROUND-SOUND HYBRID SACD | DOLBY ATMOS SPATIAL AUDIO



CASTA DIVA

Matilda Lloyd | Britten Sinfonia Rumon Gamba

Hailed as 'remarkable' by *The Daily Telegraph*, Matilda Lloyd, for this her début album for Chandos, has focussed on operatic transcriptions for trumpet, highlighting the lyrical element of her musicianship, and the musicality, and technical brilliance of the instrument.

GRAMOPHONE *Editor's choice*

Martin Cullingford's pick of the finest recordings from this month's reviews

RECORDING OF THE MONTH

EIN DEUTSCHES BAROCKREQUIEM
Vox Luminis / Lionel Meunier
Ricercar
▶ DAVID VICKERS'S REVIEW IS ON PAGE 36

The new project from Vox Luminis (Recording of the Year winners in 2012) takes the texts used by Johannes Brahms in *A German Requiem* as the inspiration for a new Baroque journey.

BRUCH. PRICE
Violin Concertos
Randall Goosby *vn*
Philadelphia Orchestra / Yannick Nézet-Séguin
Decca Classics

Randall Goosby follows his 2021 debut 'Roots' with this impressive advocacy for Florence Price's two violin concertos, alongside the more familiar one by Bruch.

▶ REVIEW ON PAGE 38

MAHLER
Symphony No 5
Montreal Symphony Orchestra / Rafael Payare
Pentatone

Rafael Payare and his Montreal Symphony players offer a reading of Mahler's Fifth of intensity and rich orchestral exploration, a real marker in their ongoing partnership.

▶ REVIEW ON PAGE 43

SCHREKER
Orchestral Works
Berlin Konzerthaus Orchestra / Christoph Eschenbach
DG

A 'meticulously prepared and wonderfully idiomatic' survey of Schreker works spanning the composer's career, thoroughly recommended by critic Christian Hoskins.

▶ REVIEW ON PAGE 47

GRIME. NEWLAND. TURNAGE
'Bracing Change 2'
Bozzini, Heath & Piatti Quartets
NMC

The NMC label offers us another superb insight into contemporary quartet-writing – three composers, three ensembles, and three compelling performances.

▶ REVIEW ON PAGE 56

'IM FREIEN'
Zlata Chochieva *pf*
Naïve

Zlata Chochieva beautifully inhabits these composer's very different sound worlds – including superb interpretations of Schumann's *Waldszenen* and Ravel's *Miroirs* – with pianism of elegance, insight and virtuosity.

▶ REVIEW ON PAGE 70

BYRD Songs of Sundrie Natures
Alamire; Fretwork / David Skinner
Inventa

Byrd's complete *Songs of Sundrie Natures* of 1589 in hugely impressive performances by Alamire and David Skinner, joined by Fretwork – a superb Byrd anniversary release.

▶ REVIEW ON PAGE 74

OBRECHT
Missa Maria zart
Cappella Pratensis / Stratton Bull
Challenge Classics

We delved into the story behind this recording – and indeed the work itself, a Renaissance masterpiece of remarkable length – last month; the result is just as wonderful as we hoped.

▶ REVIEW ON PAGE 78

SCHUBERT 'Elysium'
Carolyn Sampson *sop*
Joseph Middleton *pf*
BIS

Soprano Carolyn Sampson, pianist Joseph Middleton, Schubert songs: this album may be self-recommending on those facts alone, and to hear it is indeed to experience exquisite music-making.

▶ REVIEW ON PAGE 78

STANFORD Requiem
Sols; City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra / Martyn Brabbins
Hyperion

In this outstanding performance of a rarely heard choral work by Stanford, Martyn Brabbins guides the musicians with sensitivity and affection in a beautifully judged account.

▶ REVIEW ON PAGE 81

DVD/BLU-RAY
CAVALIERI Rappresentatione di Anima, et di Corpo
Sols; Il Giardino Armonico / Giovanni Antonini
Naxos

Director Robert Carsen brings Cavalieri's work to life; conductor Giovanni Antonini draws out the score's texture and colours.

▶ REVIEW ON PAGE 86

REISSUE/ARCHIVE
VICTOR SCHIØLER
'The Great Danish Pianist, Vol 6'
Danacord

Danish pianist Victor Schiøler's performance of Brahms's B flat major Concerto is a highlight here: 'a massive performance, wild, reckless but also considered where needs be', writes an impressed Rob Cowan.

▶ REVIEW ON PAGE 95

FOR THE RECORD

I Fagiolini in eight-album deal

The ever-innovative vocal ensemble I Fagiolini, led by founder and director Robert Hollingworth, have signed an eight album deal with Coro, the label of fellow choir The Sixteen.

Over four years, bi-annual releases on Coro will take the group, up to their 40th anniversary in 2026. Five of those will be brand new recordings of repertoire both well known and new to record: a first low-pitch recording of Victoria's *Tenebrae Responsories*; three world premiere albums of multi-choir Masses by 17th-century composer Roman Orazio Benevoli in new performance editions by Hollingworth (the first album available in October); and a new recording of works by Monteverdi. These will be accompanied by re-releases of three of I Fagiolini's acclaimed albums previously available on Decca, including the *Gramophone* Award-winning reording of Alessandro Striggio's 'Mass in 40 Parts'.

As well as their acclaimed recordings, I Fagiolini have a continued commitment to engaging with audiences through a variety of media, including education work, characterful and beautifully produced music films (their recent film *The Stag Hunt* won an Award from REMA, the European Early Music network), podcasts and video education series #SingTheScore.

'For some people the apparently contrasting sides of I Fagiolini's work sit strangely together: dramatic and complex staged productions of music usually not staged; a long-term love affair with filmed and online work; recordings of music that the world hasn't heard before and which require a strong Historically Informed Performance side,' said Hollingworth. 'To me, these sit side by side as different ways of drawing a contemporary audience into repertoire that was often not designed to be listened to as we conventionally do.'

Rachel Podger appointments

Violinist Rachel Podger will begin a two-year relationship with Tafelmusik next year, in the newly created role of Principal Guest Director. Starting in September 2024, it will also follow a year as Artist in Focus for Kings Place in London.

Regularly praised in *Gramophone*'s pages – including winning the Baroque Instrumental Award in 2016 with Biber's *Rosary* Sonatas, and being named Artist of the Year in 2018 – Podger has built up a hugely impressive catalogue of recordings over two decades.

The Tafelmusik post will see her direct three mainstage programmes per season, as well as recordings and tours. Having made her debut with the ensemble a decade ago, Podger returned to the Toronto-based group earlier this year for a project called 'La Passione: Haydn & Mozart', which she described as 'like a homecoming'.

This year sees additional releases by Podger, all on Channel Classics: a seven-disc box-set of her Vivaldi concertos recordings, and a new album of CPE Bach with Kristian Bezuidenhout are out this spring, while 'The Goldberg Variations Re-imagined' – a new arrangement by Chad Kelly of Bach's masterpiece, performed with Brecon Baroque, will be released in the autumn.

Philharmonia names new guests

Two new appointments by The Philharmonia Orchestra will reinforce relationships with the conductors Marin Alsop and Sir John Eliot Gardiner. Alsop has been named Principal Guest Conductor from the next season; and for the three subsequent seasons will develop 'three distinctive projects per season with the Orchestra, which will include new repertoire, concert formats and modes of presentation'.

Alsop said she is 'looking forward to working more closely with this innovative, forward-thinking orchestra to create programmes and projects that draw from its long history of exceptional music making and continue to embrace the new and the bold.'

Gardiner, meanwhile, has been named Principal Guest Conductor Emeritus. The conductor – who celebrated his 80th birthday in April – recently returned to working with the orchestra following a gap of 23 years. 'It's been a delight to re-encounter the translucent warmth of the legendary Philharmonia string sound, to rediscover and admire the individual character and musicality of their woodwind principals and the burnished sonority of their brass section,' he said. He begins his tenure with one concert and an international tour next season, followed after that by three programmes per season and further tours.

Temple Church's new Director

London's Temple Church has named its new Director of Music as Thomas Allery, currently the historic church's Assistant Director of Music. Starting in September, he will inherit a significant musical heritage at the church, embracing both an iconic 1927 recording of Mendelssohn's anthem *Hear my prayer* and the premiere of Sir John Tavener's all-night musical vigil *The Veil of the Temple* under Stephen Layton in 2002. Allery, a harpsichordist, organist and conductor, was previously Director of Chapel Music at Worcester College, Oxford, and at St Mary-le-Bow Church, and is a member of Ensemble Hesperi.

'Taking inspiration from my work as a conductor, chamber musician, and educator, I look forward to working with our fantastic team of musicians to create a diverse and vibrant musical programme for the future,' he said.

PHOTOGRAPHY: MATT BRODIE PHOTOGRAPHY, BROADWAY STUDIOS, ALEJANDRO S. GARRIDO

Noseda's been collecting – and lending

Gianandrea Noseda, the conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington DC, revealed last month that the owner of a number of string instruments loaned to his orchestra's players was none other than him.

The conductor began collecting instruments a decade ago, initially loaning them with the assistance of an Italian foundation to members of the Teatro Regio Torino – of which he was then Music Director – before moving the arrangement to his new orchestra, the NSO.

The collection currently consists of seven violins and one viola – valued at £5m – and began in 2011 with a 1725 violin by Venetian luthier Santo Serafino, which was lent to the Teatro Regio Torino's leader. Subsequent additions all come from makers around his home region of Lombardy. He also owns two cellos, one of which is on loan to a young cellist, the other of which will soon be made available to the NSO.

Principals get first choice, after which other players can enter a ballot to have an instrument for two years. For Noseda,

it's part of his focus on orchestra sound-building, and indeed team building, but he also hopes that by making public his collection, he might inspire others to follow in his footsteps. He told the *Washington Post*: 'How do you reinvest in your art form? I feel like this is a responsibility. There is a part of me that wants to make things better in my profession. This is never a one-man show.'

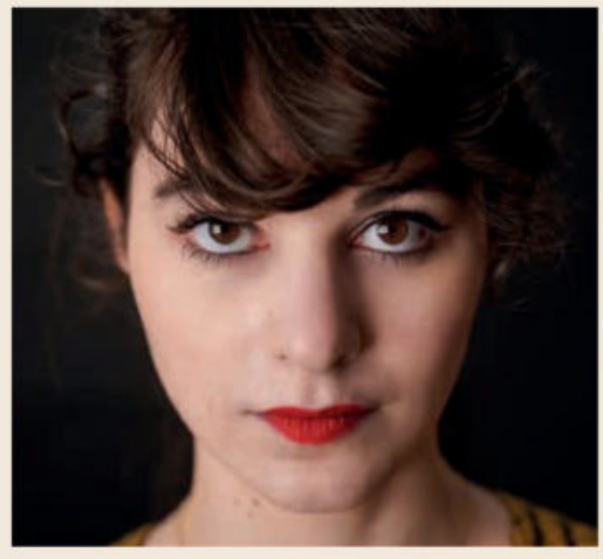
Noseda and his NSO musicians can be heard in an ongoing series of the Sinfonias of George Walker – you can hear him talk about the repertoire in a recent *Gramophone* podcast available at **gramophone.co.uk** – as well as an ongoing series of Beethoven symphonies, the next instalment of which is out on May 19.

ONE TO WATCH

Juliette Journaux Piano

Alpha, always one of the more stylishly forward-thinking labels, recently launched a series called Piano Stories, devoted to highlighting emerging artists and offering them freedom to present their creative personalities – and that's where we've turned this month. Camille El Bacha came first, followed by Giorgi Gigashvili, and the next in the series will be Juliette Journaux.

Born in 1996, Journaux attended the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Paris in Paris, where her studies including accompaniment, which has influenced her first Alpha album. Called 'Wanderer Without Words', it 'evokes the figure of the Wanderer: a walker, a nomad, a man who walks alone without apparent purpose. He confronts a nature that is beyond him and his deepest thoughts.' This leads leads us naturally to Schubert (including 'Der Wanderer' in the transcription by Liszt), Mahler ('Der Abschied' from *Das Lied von der Erde* and 'Ich bin der Welt' from the *Rückert Lieder*) and Wagner. The art of transcription, of recreating vocal textures on the piano, is of particular interest to Journaux, drawing on her studies in



accompaniment, her wider work as a vocal coach in several French opera houses, and her performing partnership with the Austrian baritone Liviu Hollender.

According to Didier Martin, Artistic Director of Alpha, when Journaux proposed her concept, he felt that she had been 'maturing this programme for years so I said "go for it!" The recording took place in the inspiring city of Dobiaccho in Italy, the town where Mahler composed *Das Lied von der Erde*.' Look out for a release later this year.

PHOTOGRAPHY: TONY HITCHCOCK, OLIVIER LALANNE, TESSA TRAEGER

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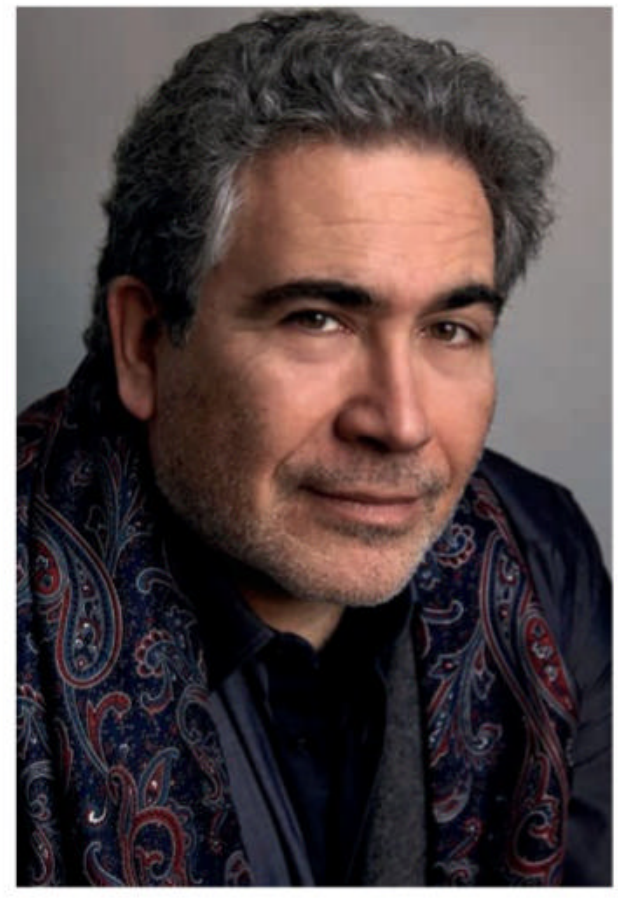
Podcasts

This month on the *Gramophone* Podcast we feature conductor Carlo Rizzi, who has recorded Mercadante's *Il Proscritto* for Opera Rara, another rarity to add to the label's growing catalogue. We also welcome pianist Cédric Tiberghien, who has just released a new album, 'Variation[s]', on Harmonia Mundi. It takes Beethoven's many sets of themes and variations for solo piano as its starting



Carlo Rizzi is a guest on the Gramophone Podcast

point, and weaves in major sets by others composers, in Vol 1 by Mozart, Schumann and Webern. James Jolly caught up with the pianist in New York, via Zoom, to talk about the project. We also feature two singers who have produced albums dedicated to English song: countertenor Alexander Chance, who joins Martin Cullingford to talk about his debut album of English lute songs, 'Drop not, mine Eyes', recorded with lutenist Tony Carr, and baritone James Newby, whose new album for BIS, 'Fallen to Dust', explores English song on the theme of death.

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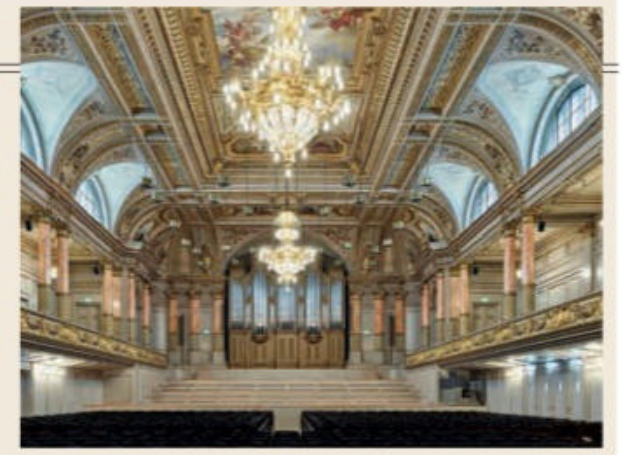
STUDIO PROFILE

Tonhalle, Zurich

This month we look at an easily forgotten recording gem with an acoustic that puts it among the greatest of studios, writes **Tim Parry**



On the shore of Lake Zurich in the heart of the city lies the Tonhalle, the home of one of Switzerland's finest orchestras, Zurich's Tonhalle Orchestra, and the source of many superb recordings since 1942. The Grosser Saal, where orchestral concerts and recordings are made (there is a smaller hall ideal for chamber music), seats an audience of around 1500 and boasts an acoustic with an ideal balance of clarity and reverberation. The hall has been the home of the orchestra since 1895, when it was inaugurated by a concert that included Brahms conducting his *Triumphlied*, Op 55.

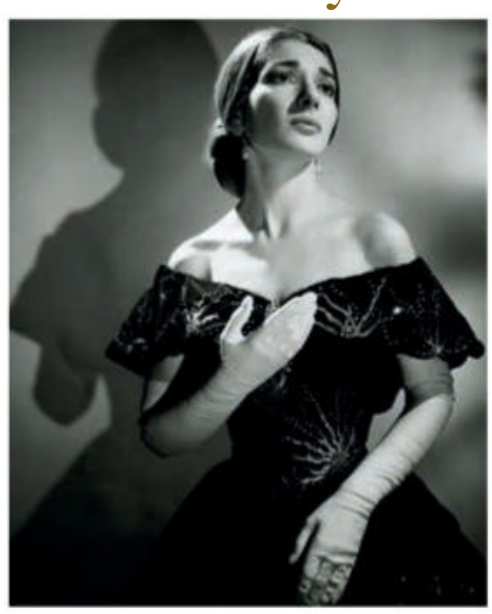
Designed by the Viennese architects Ferdinand Fellner and Hermann Helmer, who had planned Zurich's City Theatre – now the Opera House – a few years earlier, the Tonhalle was a key feature of the newly created lakeside promenade, with striking architecture that included fanciful towers resembling the Palais du Trocadéro in Paris. In the late 1930s, these were demolished as the building was replaced by the present structure, designed by Max Ernst Haefeli, Werner Max Moser and Rudolf Steiger for the Swiss National Exhibition in 1939. Thankfully the two concert halls were preserved and integrated into the new conference building.

The Grosser Saal is a classic shoe-box design, modelled on Leipzig's 1884 Gewandhaus concert hall. Two huge chandeliers hang beneath five large oil paintings on the ceiling by the Viennese artist Peregrin von Gastgeb, portraying Bach, Handel, Gluck, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Wagner and Brahms. In recent years the interior decoration has been restored to its former glory as part of a major renovation between 2017 and 2021 that included installing a new organ.

The engineer Simon Eadon worked extensively at the Tonhalle, notably with the conductor David Zinman, who was the music director of the Tonhalle Orchestra from 1995 to 2014. He describes the acoustic as 'lovely, whether the hall is full of people for a concert or empty for a recording'. When the hall was empty, the acoustic could be rather lively and a huge curtain in the auditorium was available to control the reverberation and imitate the presence of an audience. But then, in the early 2000s, more richly upholstered seating was installed with the intention of absorbing some of sound, the idea being that each seat would replicate the presence of a human body. The difference was initially disconcerting, but these seats could be unscrewed from the floor, and for recording, Eadon tells me, they would remove several rows. 'Before this change to the seating we were trying to kill the acoustic, and after we were trying to retrieve it.' In both cases, once the hall is set up for a recording with the desired support and reverberation period for the sound, very little manipulation is needed in post-production. In an interview with *Gramophone* in April 2014, David Zinman enthused about the Tonhalle's acoustic: 'It's the ideal hall for Beethoven because you can play unbelievably crisply and the sound just continues on.'

Simon Eadon considers the Tonhalle an easily forgotten gem: 'It's one of those venues that many people don't know about – unlike the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam or the Musikverein in Vienna – but I think it's up there with those venues that have a legendary status.' He would take students from the University of Surrey's celebrated Tonmeister course, who were doing their annual placement with the production company Floating Earth, to Zurich for the chance to experience the recording process at its best. Among the treasured memories Eadon has of recording at the Tonhalle is Yuja Wang's album of Ravel's piano concertos with the conductor Lionel Bringuier (DG, 11/15), where the sound has that balance of crispness and bloom so cherished by David Zinman.

Delving into the diva's history



A new exhibition at London's V&A opening June 24, will seek to explore and redefine the role of 'diva' 'and how this has been subverted or embraced over time across opera, stage, popular music, and film'. Exhibits include a portrait of Adelina Patti, the costumes worn by Maria Callas for her first and last performances at Covent Garden, a Vivienne Westwood dress designed for Joyce DiDonato, plus posters and song sheets related to the subject.

Emelyanychev extends at SCO

The Scottish Chamber Orchestra will continue its relationship with Russian conductor Maxim Emelyanychev through to 2028, which will embrace the ensemble's 50th anniversary season (2023/4). A *Gramophone* Award-winner with his Baroque group Il Pomo d'Oro, recordings with his Edinburgh ensemble include a release of Schubert's Symphony No 9 on Linn.

HMV back on Oxford Street

The original central London HMV store will reopen later this year, following four-years away from Oxford street. The shop was shut in 2019 after the company went into administration, but after a takeover and having now returned to profit, the historic outlet – initially opened in 1921 – will reopen, while 24 new sites and 14 existing stores will also be similarly rebranded this year.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GEORG AERNI; HOUSTON ROGERS/VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM; LONDON

GRAMOPHONE *talks to ...*

Matilda Lloyd

The trumpeter on 'Casta Diva', her album of music originally for voice

Where did the inspiration for 'Casta Diva' come from?
Tiny seeds of the idea were sewn when I was still at school. I used to play principal trumpet in the Sevenoaks Symphony Orchestra and the conductor brought me in to do some concertos with the orchestra. He arranged 'O Sole Mio' as an encore for trumpet and orchestra and then also did the 'Una furtive lagrima' from *L'eisir d'amore*. They went down so well with the audience and really suited my style of playing. They're very expressive and emotional, as well as being lyrical and melodic. I think the trumpet still has those stereotypes attached to it of being used for a military fanfare, or loud interjections, and also is obviously historically 'male'. So showcasing the expressive and lyrical side were things that were really important to me with this album.

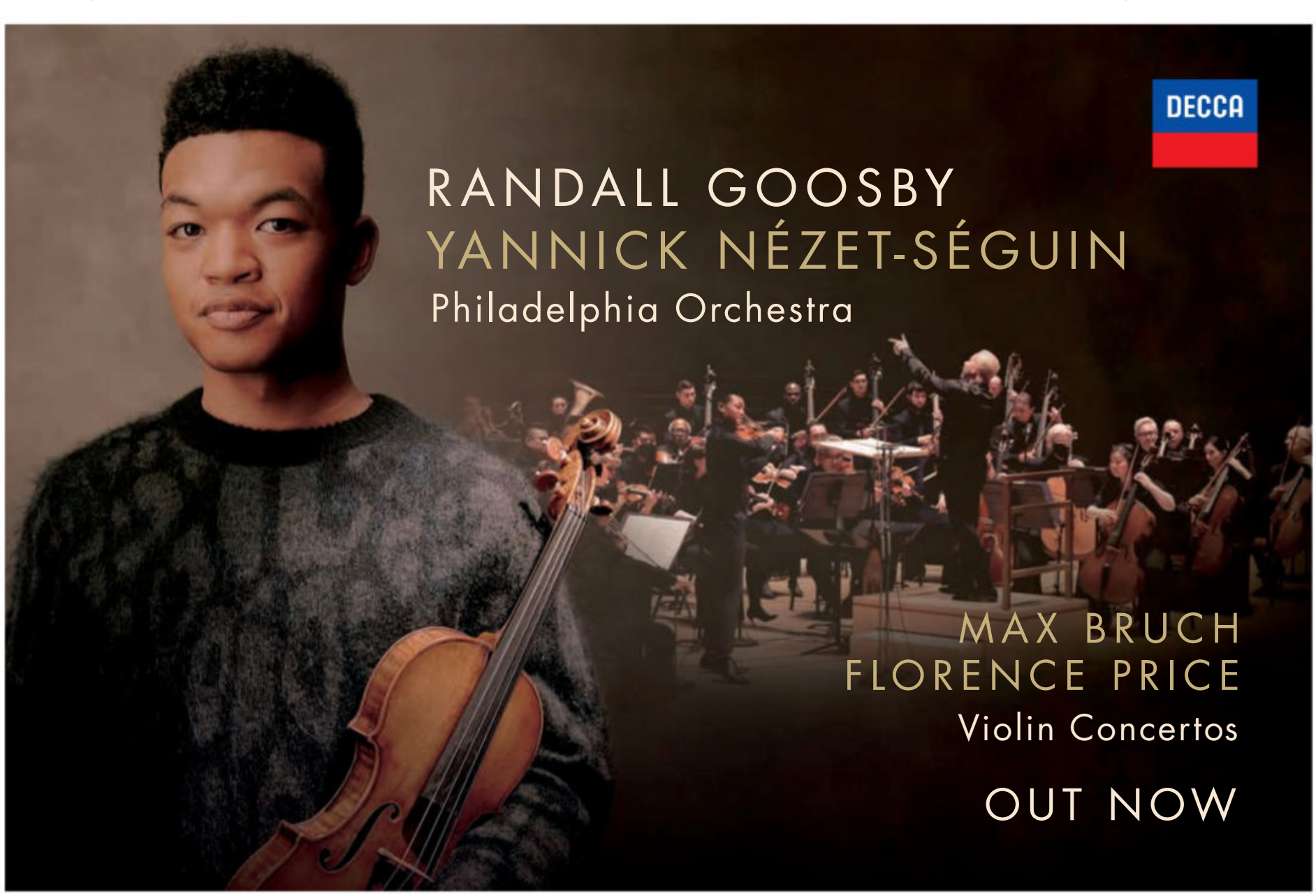
What's your own relationship to opera?
I was not raised on opera at all. The first time I actually went to an opera was while I was at Cambridge. My tonal skills supervisor Chad Kelly worked at the ENO and when I told him I'd never been to an opera, he got me a ticket to a dress rehearsal of *Meistersinger*. I went down to London and that was my first ever opera that I went to – in my second year at Cambridge. So my relationship with opera is relatively new and still developing!

How did you prepare for the recording?
I listened to as many different versions of each aria as I could to get a general picture and learn a bit more about the musical writing at the time. I actually did a paper on Rossini in my final year at Cambridge, so I had a fair bit of academic knowledge. The paper was mainly focused on his overtures, but I learned a lot about the different types of operas and styles of composition.

I also had a session with a really good friend of mine, Michael Craddock, who sings in Gesualdo Six. Mike specialises in that repertoire, so he helped me with idiomatic ways of phrasing, explaining the kind of melismas they would have in a lot of these arias, especially in the cavatina, which is more fast and virtuosic. Once I'd done all that kind of research, I then had to look at the trumpet and the instrument and say, OK, what could the trumpet do that singers couldn't have done?

How do you think the trumpet is able to express this music?
I want to show the versatility of the trumpet. On the album we've got bel canto arias that tend to start with the cavatina, which is more lyrical. A couple of them also have recitativo sections. That was quite interesting to mimic the voice and the pacing, so I paid quite a lot of attention to the lyrics and the type of articulation that I was using.

'Casta Diva' is out on Chandos – for a longer version of this article see gramophone.co.uk



PHOTOGRAPHY: GEOFFROY SCHIED

Meeting pianist Zlata Chochieva

International Piano, a sister-title of Gramophone, is a magazine devoted to the artists and music of the piano world, edited by Gramophone's Deputy Editor, Tim Parry. Here, he introduces its latest issue:

The May issue of *International Piano* magazine features the Russian pianist Zlata Chochieva. The Berlin-based pianist discusses her new album on Naïve – an Editor's Choice in this issue of *Gramophone* (see our review on page 70) – and its association with nature. In a fascinating interview, Chochieva also talks about her studies in Moscow with Mikhail Pletnev when she was a teenager and various pianistic influences on her as she was growing up.

Other features this month include an in-depth exploration of the pianist and composer Adolph von Henselt from Jeremy Nicholas, in conversation with the pianist Daniel Grimwood, who has spent years promoting the music of this neglected but influential figure. To mark the 100th anniversary of Ligeti's birth, Jed Distler offers a survey of the history on record of the composer's Études, the most significant post-Debussy masterpieces in the form. The latest in Bryce Morrison's series on 'Polarising Pianists', which explores the recorded legacy of musicians whose piano-playing has divided opinion, focuses on Moriz Rosenthal, whose interventionist virtuosity is born of another age and has the capacity to both thrill and dismay.

International Piano's One to Watch this issue is the Ukrainian pianist Illia Ovcharenko, who won the Honens Competition last year. Murray McLachlan continues his series of guides for those returning to playing the piano, and in addition sheds interesting light on recording the complete piano sonatas by Geoffrey Allen. Piano duo Tessa Uys and Ben Schoeman talk about their recordings of Scharwenka's Beethoven transcriptions, while Chiyan Wong reflects on recording jazz-influenced music by Ravel and Tsfasman with the LSO. Last, but not least, *International Piano*'s reviews coverage ranges from albums from Martha Argerich, Yevgeny Sudbin, Boris Giltburg and many others, alongside reviews of sheet music and live concerts.

Get your copy today at **International-Piano.com**

Summer and autumn seasons

Several major venues and festivals unveiled their coming seasons this month. Starting with the summer months, the **BBC Proms** will begin its eight weeks of music-making in London's Royal Albert Hall and on the airwaves on July 14, the 84 concerts including Sir John Eliot Gardiner marking his 80th-birthday year with Berlioz's *The Trojans* and the UK premiere of György Kurtág's first opera, *Endgame*. There's an anniversary focus on Rachmaninov, 15 new commissions and co-commissions, and visiting orchestras will include the Budapest Festival Orchestra, the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Tonhalle Orchestra Zurich. A week-long Proms festival will also take place at Sage Gateshead, as well as concerts in Londonderry, Aberystwyth, Dewsbury, Truro, Perth and Great Yarmouth. Reaching out to new audiences isn't just limited to location either, the festival also offering Bollywood and Northern Soul Proms, and welcoming Fado singer Mariza.

After weeks of controversy about the closure – since suspended – of the BBC Singers, the acclaimed choral group will perform at five Proms, including the First and Last Nights, the latter of which will be conducted by Marin Alsop.

The **Edinburgh Festival** also unveiled its first season under new director, Nicola Benedetti. Taking place between August 4 and 27, it will take inspiration from Martin Luther King Jr and his belief in people's capacity to unite, its 295 events asking audiences to consider 'how the transformative power of the arts can have the most impact on society at this moment'. Visiting ensembles include the Budapest Festival Orchestra conducted by Iván Fischer, the Simón Bolívar Symphony Orchestra of Venezuela with conductors Gustavo Dudamel and Rafael Payare, and the first UK appearance by the Korean KBS Symphony Orchestra.

Sir Donald Runnicles will conduct a concert performance of *Tannhäuser*, the only major Wagner opera not to have been performed at the Festival, and at the other end of the scale, intimate morning recitals at The Queen's Hall will include pianists Mao Fujita, Leif Ove Andsnes and Bertrand Chamayou.

Meanwhile, looking to the autumn, the New York **Metropolitan Opera** has unveiled a season promising 'the most new works in the company's modern history', including four premieres at the venue: Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking*; Anthony Davis's *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*; Daniel Catán's *Florencia en el Amazonas*, the company's first opera in Spanish in nearly a century; and John Adams's *El Niño*. Of older repertoire, there will be new productions of *Carmen* and *La Forza del Destino*. Continuing its commitment to audiences beyond the venue, nine operas will be transmitted live to cinemas worldwide as part of The Met: Live in HD series. Artists making their Met debuts include soprano Asmik Grigorian, tenor Jonathan Tetelman, baritone Christian Gerhaher, and conductor Marin Alsop, and the season opens on September 26.

Finally, the **Royal Opera House** will open its 2023/24 season at Covent Garden with two major new works on both its stages: on the main auditorium, a new production of *Das Rheingold*, conducted by Sir Antonio Pappano and directed by Barrie Kosky, with a cast led by Christopher Maltman as Wotan and Christopher Purves as Alberich. Meanwhile in the Linbury Theatre, a new work by Sir George Benjamin and librettist Martin Crimp – *Picture a day like this* – will receive its UK premiere, following its world premiere this summer at the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence.

It is Pappano's final season as Music Director, and his last new production in the post will be of Strauss's *Elektra*, starring Nina Stemme and Karita Mattila. His farewell, however – following a gala – will be a revival of Sir David McVicar's production of Giordano's *Andrea Chénier*. There's also a contemporary new staging of Bizet's *Carmen*, and if you can't make it to Covent Garden, the Royal Ballet and Royal Opera will together present 13 productions in 1500 cinemas across the season, and 24 more productions will be added online to ROH Stream.

PENTATONE

UN BALLO IN MASCHERA

New Take On Verdi's Tragicomic Masterpiece

Freddie De Tommaso, **Lester Lynch** and **Saioa Hernández** star in this new studio production of Verdi's tragicomic masterpiece **Un ballo in maschera** with the **Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte-Carlo**. Conductor **Marek Janowski** approaches the ingenuous score with his eye for symphonic architecture, resulting in a lively and balanced performance.

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WHAT NEXT?

In our guide to further listening, Mark Seow starts with Biber's Rosary (Mystery) Sonatas – and the ensuing musical journey takes some weird and wonderful turns

When Rachel Podger was recording Biber's *Rosary* (*Mystery*) Sonatas at the church of St Jude-on-the-Hill, London, in January 2015, she started to notice her violin playing up. The tailgut – the thick piece of gut connecting the tailpiece to the button on the bottom side of the instrument – started to fray and look dangerously worn. Cue a quick trip to a luthier, and the tailgut was replaced mid-recording. This set of 16 sonatas dating from the 1670s are best known for their extensive use of *scordatura*, and such extreme detunings of the usual G–D–A–E configuration test the violin's physicality. Indeed, **Rachel Podger**'s *Gramophone* Award-winning recording (with David Miller, Marcin Świątkiewicz and Jonathan Manson; Channel Classics, 10/15) is an excellent starting point for the mysterious set, particularly her Sonata No 10, 'The Crucifixion' – gnarly and grotesque in all the right places.

Biber's Rosary Sonatas begin our journey

Amandine Beyer's recent release of the Biber also offers a well-honed interpretation (Harmonia Mundi, 3/23). Her more airborne take on 'The Crucifixion' – pungent and prickly in excellent measure – bears signs of her longtime collaboration with choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker and her dance company Rosas.

Venture a bit further from Biber's famous *Rosary* Sonatas, and you'll find even weirder harmonic universes. The **Sonata seconda d'inventione per il violino**, the 57th piece in **Biagio Marini**'s Op 8 set (Venice, 1626-29), instructs the violinist to retune mid-movement: during a seven-bar rest, the player is to lower the top string to a C ('Qui si accorda il Cantino in terza minore'). **Monica Huggett**'s 1999 recording (for Stradivarius), supported by Galatea, is wonderfully doleful. The *scordatura* section is palpably distingushed from the norm, with the violin becoming nasal, almost trombone-like.

Our homework is done for us with the album **'L'arte della scordatura: Violin Works from Biber to Tartini'** (Passacaille), recorded in 2019 by **Mayumi Hirasaki** et al. Unknown to me was **Tartini**'s three-movement **Pastorale** (*c*1731), which employs a scordatura of A–E–A–E. Here the violin is cast as something tighter, clenched and ready to jig. A similar bright, timbral tightness occurs in **Johannes Pramsohler** and his Ensemble Diderot's premiere recording of **Violin Concerto No 3 in F** by the little-known early 18th-century composer **Johann Jakob Kress** (Audax, recorded 2022). Here the solo violin is tuned a semitone higher, playing in the key of E while the ensemble remains in F. The *scordatura* functions as a natural spotlight, with Pramsohler wondrously illuminated – wiry but warm.

GRAMOPHONE

NEXT MONTH JULY 2023

Handel: a life in six years

As a way of understanding Handel in the context of his times, Richard Wigmore has selected years that are major milestones in his life and music, and explores in great depth what was going on – and suggests which works to explore

Music for brass

Onyx Brass is marking its 30th anniversary with an album on NMC of new music from a diverse range of composers. Richard Whitehouse talks to some of those involved in this fascinating project

Brahms's Violin Concerto

Charlotte Gardner has been immersed in the vast catalogue of this much-loved – and much-recorded – concerto. Which one is her favourite?

ON SALE JUNE 15 DON'T MISS IT

PHOTOGRAPHY: GERALD COKE HANDEL COLLECTION, FOUNDLING MUSEUM/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

CARTE BLANCHE

As the Borletti-Buitoni Trust's 20th anniversary approaches, Editor-in-Chief **James Jolly** meets **Ilaria Borletti Buitoni**, the BBT's co-founder and its music-loving guiding spirit

It's better to give than to receive

'I went to a religious school in Milan, run by nuns. I'm not particularly religious – or maybe a little bit religious, so I've always thought that all that we receive should be returned in a way. This is a sort of basic idea, on which everything was built. It's a great joy when you see that something that can be done for somebody else produces a really positive, good, effective result. I think there is an enormous joy in giving in life – not particularly in taking – but in giving, because if you expect to take, usually you are disappointed, so you should never expect anything. But in giving, there is an enormous joy.' Ilaria Borletti Buitoni makes no secret that she has enjoyed a privileged life: her family's wealth derives in part from the chain of La Rinascente department stores that can be found in most Italian cities, and her late husband, Franco, was a scion of the pasta manufacturer (now owned by Nestlé). But rather than live in pampered luxury, both of them were determined to give something back.

'I think that my approach,' Ilaria explains, 'is very much linked to the approach that the Milanese bourgeoisie had after the war. They were always extremely involved in the community where they were living. So, the hospitals were completely built by members of these families. The universities were helped. And when La Scala was bombed during the war, a cousin of mine got together five or six members of the city and in 16 minutes they found the money to rebuild La Scala, simply because this was what you did. My grandfather was a very famous businessman, but he was also a senator. He had a very deep sense of doing something for his people, not only the people who were working in his companies, but for the community. It would never have occurred to him that someone could be a good entrepreneur without thinking about the schools, without thinking about giving a quality of life to his people. At that time, there was a lot of immigration from the south of Italy. So, of course, if people were coming to work in the north, like Milan, the entrepreneur wanted to give them a quality of life, and that included providing good schools and a good health system. And at that time it was not so fashionable!'

Ilaria Borletti Buitoni: devoted supporter of music

Twenty years ago, Franco and Ilaria established the Borletti-Buitoni Trust to facilitate, at a critical time in young musicians' lives, the transition to fully professional careers. The list of artists who have been assisted by the BBT reads like a roll call of today's greats. The hit-rate is astoundingly high – a random dozen produces conductor Robin Ticciati, pianists James Baillieu, Jonathan Biss and Beatrice Rana, violinists Vilde Frang and Alina Ibragimova, cellist Gautier Capuçon, flautist Adam Walker, clarinettist Martin Fröst, singers Ruby Hughes and James Newby, not to mention a galaxy of amazing string quartets (Castalian, Danish, Ébène, Heath, Jerusalem and Pavel Haas to pick just six). Ilaria, who freely admits to zero musicianship herself, clearly has that natural response in recognizing talent, not that she gets involved in the selection process at all. 'This is completely due to the quality of the Artistic Committee because it was always made up of people who have a very clear idea – and this was very much the idea of my husband and myself – that the Trust is there to help real talent. I have never made a suggestion to the committee, I think that my role is completely different. I never wanted to interfere with their approach because I think that their approach is the right one. Talent and quality, this is what we are looking for. And if this is there, then maybe we can do something to help.'

> 'I think there is an enormous joy in giving in life' – *Ilaria Borletti Buitoni*

Key to philanthropy in any artistic endeavour is knowing where to focus the financial support. The 'easy' way is to simply bank-roll a concert, a new production of an opera or a play, but arguably the most lasting way is to assist creative people at key moments. 'For some reason I've always had a kind of antipathy for the child prodigy,' Ilaria freely admits, 'children who are six years old and can play all the Beethoven sonatas. I don't know why I never have been particularly intrigued by this phenomenon. But I think that there is a moment in the life of a young musician – which is usually a little bit after school life is over, and at the beginning of a career – which really is very critical. They can choose the wrong agent, they can choose the wrong path, they can forget about developing certain studies. And this is a moment where the Trust, which is not only there to provide economic help but is also an advisor in many other ways can be extremely helpful. If a young artist makes a mistake, their entire career can have a different development from what it should have.'

And key to much of the BBT's success has been having Dame Mitsuko Uchida as a member of the Artistic Committee. 'For Mitsuko, and she would tell it much better than me,' Ilaria says, 'music is a religion. Music is not at all a place where you compromise, neither with yourself nor with the people you have to deal with. So, if you have a mentor of that quality, this already is an experience. It's not only because she would say, "No, the phrase is not like this, maybe you should play it like this". No, it's something more. It's a personal and human

Ilaria with her late husband, Franco Buitoni

attitude that she has and I'm sure that's something she's trying to give to the artist to make them understand how they can develop to the best their talent. Because talent is one of the most miraculous gifts in the world, but you can also waste it if you make the wrong choice.'

When Ilaria Borletti met Franco Buitoni they'd both experienced life – they'd both been married before – and they both loved music. Ilaria recalls Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli coming to play piano duets with her mother. 'I think he was also a little bit in love with her because she was very beautiful. But he was not an easy character, as we all know. I remember hearing him play in London and somebody in the hall had a problem coughing and suddenly he simply closed the piano and disappeared. He was a terrible character, but he loved my mother and he used to come and play with her. Also my mother was playing piano rather well and I think she was hoping that I would following her path. And, of course, I was a complete disaster in anything I did which had to do with music!'

As a cultured Milanese, Ilaria was naturally drawn to the opera – 'the more dramatic the better. I adored Verdi!' – but Franco's musical passions lay elsewhere. 'When I met Franco,' Ilaria recalls, 'he told me his favourite kind of music is Lieder. He took me to a concert, of *Winterreise*, in Perugia. There were about three people sitting in the hall because Italians generally don't like Lied. For the first 10 minutes I thought I'd kill myself! Then a few minutes later, a sort of light came on for me. I immediately understood what

Filippo Gorini, 2023 Franco Buitoni Award winner

it was that made him so love this kind of music. So he opened for me a completely different approach, which I didn't have, and this was the start. But from then on it was chamber music and not symphonic music for me. Slowly I left behind opera and symphonic music and I joined him in his passion for song and chamber music. It was a wonderful journey that was extremely important for us. It opened doors that I hadn't really explored before.'

As the 20th anniversary draws close, and a weekend of concerts at both Peckham's Multi-Storey Car Park and Wigmore Hall to showcase some of the musicians helped by the BBT over the past decades, what gives Ilaria the most satisfaction? 'Well, I will answer first by telling you that what gave me *least* satisfaction was my political career [she was elected to the Italian Parliament in 2013 and subsequently was appointed as Under-Secretary for Cultural Heritage] which was short, interesting, but totally useless in my opinion. Politics for people like me who are not desperate to seek honour is something a little bit useless. But what gives me enormous satisfaction was my work Africa [in 1993 she was one of the founders of AMREF Italia, an NGO with 25,000 donors, which supports medical and educational programmes in East Africa] and also the BB Trust. I have to say that when I go through the 20th anniversary brochure and I see the names and how many of these artists could get a wonderful career, what I'm not saying is that this is *due* to the BB Trust, but maybe a little help was given by the Trust. I'm very, very happy that we managed to do all this, thanks to the artistic committee and all the team.'

The 2023 recipient of the biennial Franco Buitoni Award, one made by the BBT and worth £25,000, is the Italian pianist Filippo Gorini ('Everything in his recording of the *Diabelli* Variations shows musical awareness and technical aplomb at a high level of fusion, and his own booklet essay confirms his grasp of the overall architecture … as well as immediate character,' wrote David Fanning in October 2017, while two years ago, Peter Quantrill reviewed his *Art of Fugue* in glowing terms). Striking is that this young pianist has created a project – which helped him gain this award – that almost takes on a philanthropic role itself. He has come up his 'Sonata for 7 Cities' which over the course of a year (2025-26) will find him spending a month in each of seven cities around the world. Each residency will contain an important recital and concerto performance with the city's orchestra, but the rest of his time will be devoted, as the award citation puts it, 'to creative local partnerships with free educational, mentoring and philanthropic activity as well as performances in more unusual venues beyond the city centre for audiences who are not regular concert-goers for a variety of reasons'.

When I suggest to Ilaria that here's a case of philanthropy spawning further philanthropy, she shrugs. 'Well, he's also Milanese! I think Filippo is a very special guy because, first of all, when you meet him and you talk to him, you think that he's much older than he is. He has an attitude to life which is completely mature, deep, intense and this is not part of his age. Also the way he approaches music, the way he studied Bach, he's very near the concept of Mitsuko. Music for him is a religion. And regarding what he wants to do with the Franco Buitoni Award, well I think this is part of his background. He undertands the sense of receiving and giving back. He knows what this means and I think he's rather exceptional.' G

The Borletti-Buitoni Trust anniversary weekend runs June 9-11. Full details at **bbtrust.com**

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANISSA HELOU, SIMON WEIR

NOTES & LETTERS

Write to us at St Jude's Church, Dulwich Road, London SE24 0PB or gramophone@markallengroup.com; email is preferable at this time

Snape Maltings

I read Tim Parry's Studio Profile (May, Page 10) of the Snape Maltings in Suffolk with interest and huge nostalgia.

When I founded Collins Classics in 1989, it was my ambition to schedule as many recordings as possible at the Snape Concert Hall. When embarking on our Britten Edition series, there would surely be no other venue that could have formed so integral a part of the recording process.

One of our very first recordings in 1990 featured the British cellist Robert Cohen and Bach's Cello Suites. The warm, unique, and stunning acoustic suiting the solo cello perfectly.

Many recordings followed, including those by Steuart Bedford, Joanna MacGregor, The Britten Quartet, Cristina Ortiz, Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, and The Sixteen with Harry Christophers.

The majority of these sessions were engineered by the late John Timperley, whose famed multi-track recording techniques enabled the listener to actually hear and feel the hall as well as focusing on the artists performing within it.

A memorable highlight for me was the live recording at Snape of Sir John Tavener's *Mary of Egypt*. Heady conversations with Sir John at one of the on-site cafés followed each performance, where discussions covering religion, art, music and philosophy were often partaken, accompanied by a fine red and local Suffolk cuisine.

The warmth of the concert hall acoustic was matched only by the warmth that the local surrounding areas of Aldeburgh, Iken, Orford and Blythburgh afforded us. The opportunity to be able to stay in lovely cottages and work on the same site in Snape with such incredibly tranquil surroundings was unparalleled.

I am proud to have been associated in some small part in the life and history of this great venue.

Alan Booth
Founder, Collins Classics
via email

Our centenary issue

Just a short note to congratulate you on the April issue. Of course, congratulations were always due for such an impressive publishing achievement, but this particular issue is of outstanding interest with its series of retrospectives covering no fewer than 76 pages.

Of course, as a subscriber since the 1960s, nostalgia is involved – all those reviewers, now no longer with us, whose reviews I devoured – but I cannot imagine anyone interested in recorded classical music who would not find this fascinating.

Peter Clayton
via email

... more

Gramophone's Special Centenary Collectors' Edition has provided us all with a wealth of wonderful memories, but it was the Studio Profile of Watford's Colosseum and, on the next page, Andrew Keener's reference to EMG Handmade Gramophones that caught my eye …

When I left school in 1964 and started work in London, just downstream from the Royal Festival Hall (my second home!) I soon found my favourite record shop, Henry Stave & Company in Dean Street;

Letter of the Month

Artists for tomorrow –how will they fare?

I have been an avid and regular reader since coming across a copy of *The Gramophone* (as it then was) in the school library some 60-odd years ago. I have agreed and disagreed with reviews and with reviewers' thoughts and comments on individual performers and performances, and have had for quite a while my own list of trusted contributors.

I was fascinated then with your '10 artists for tomorrow' (April, page 52) and was quite reassured to find I had recordings of three of them. What crossed my mind, however, was which of these will stand the test of time?

In all fields of life there are the rockets which light the skies but rapidly burn out while there are the slow burners whose greatness takes longer to be appreciated. There is no way really of knowing in the early days which is which and we are all enriched by whatever they have to contribute.

So then, a challenge to *Gramophone*! How about a review in, say, two or five or 10 years to see what the trajectories of these young people have actually been. And similarly, what about the near misses as you made your compilation? I am not suggesting for one minute that this is a sort of zero-sum game but rather that it might add to the ups and downs witnessed regularly through the pages of this magazine.

Randall Goosby, one of our 'artists for tomorrow'

In the meantime – a huge thank you for this monthly treat, and here's to the next 100 years.

Simon I'Anson
Bath, Somerset

RAYMOND WEIL
GENEVE

Each Letter of the Month now receives a RAYMOND WEIL *toccata* classic wristwatch RRP £595

RAYMOND WEIL are a Swiss luxury watch brand inspired by horology, music and family.

This *toccata* classic wristwatch features a sleek stainless steel 39mm case, Swiss quartz movement, sophisticated Roman numeral dial with a date window at 3 o'clock and complemented by a black leather strap with alligator finish.

This elegant and timeless *toccata* model celebrates the artistic and musical spirit behind the brand's DNA. Following in the footsteps of the great composers, *toccata* promotes **RAYMOND WEIL**'s Swiss horology while respecting the tradition and heritage handed down from generation to generation within the family company.

but I would also pop round the corner into Soho Square and to EMG to pick up their monthly review Letter, and in 1969 I spotted a 'blooper'. Reviewing the LP of Colin Davis's account of Berlioz's *Te Deum* the writer considered some of the tempos a little sluggish, and blamed the reverberant acoustic of Westminster Cathedral (where the same team recorded the Requiem). But I am sure I remember reading at the time in *Gramophone* (or *Records and Recording*) that because the organ in the Cathedral was not up to par, the recording was made instead in Watford's Colosseum (or Town Hall as it was then called), and the tapes then taken back to the Netherlands and to a church so the Philips engineers could add some reverb.

Perhaps *Gramophone*'s readers or your editorial team (or Mr Keener? …) could tell me whether or not my memory has served me well.

Michael Browne
Beeston, Notts

Franck discovery

In the April issue there is a review by Christian Hoskins of an Alpha issue of three orchestral pieces by César Franck. Of those my focus is herewith on the original symphonic interlude from *Rédemption*. The review claims that this is the first ever recording of this work. It also states that it was re-discovered by M Joêl-Marie Fauquet.

In the notes belonging to a set of Franck's orchestral works issued by Fuga Libera, the same M Fauquet confirms that it was he who found the manuscript and brought it to the attention of the Orchestre Philharmonique Royal de Liège and that it was recorded by this orchestra for the first time.

I do not have the recording date of the Alpha recording played by the Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra under Alain Altinoglu, but the Liège recording is from September 2021 and exists as part of a four-CD set with the Liège orchestra.

This may be a quite insignificant issue but facts should be correct. However, this must not put a stop to our need, I believe, to hear as much of Franck's output as possible!

Per Madsen
Copenhagen, Denmark

Ryuichi Sakamoto RIP

Professor, no less, Ryuichi Sakamoto, Japanese composer and an avant-gardist of sorts, was the voice behind the soundtracks for the 1983 film *Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence*, with fellow composer Adam Sweeting.

'I was born in Japan but I don't think I'm Japanese,' he commented in 1988, two years prior to his moving to New York. 'To be a stranger – I like that attitude. I don't like nationalities and borders.' He always seemed like a legal alien in a foreign land. A restless traveller, musically and personally. He melded skills as a classically-trained musician with a gift for electronic music and an ear for eclectic musical styles.

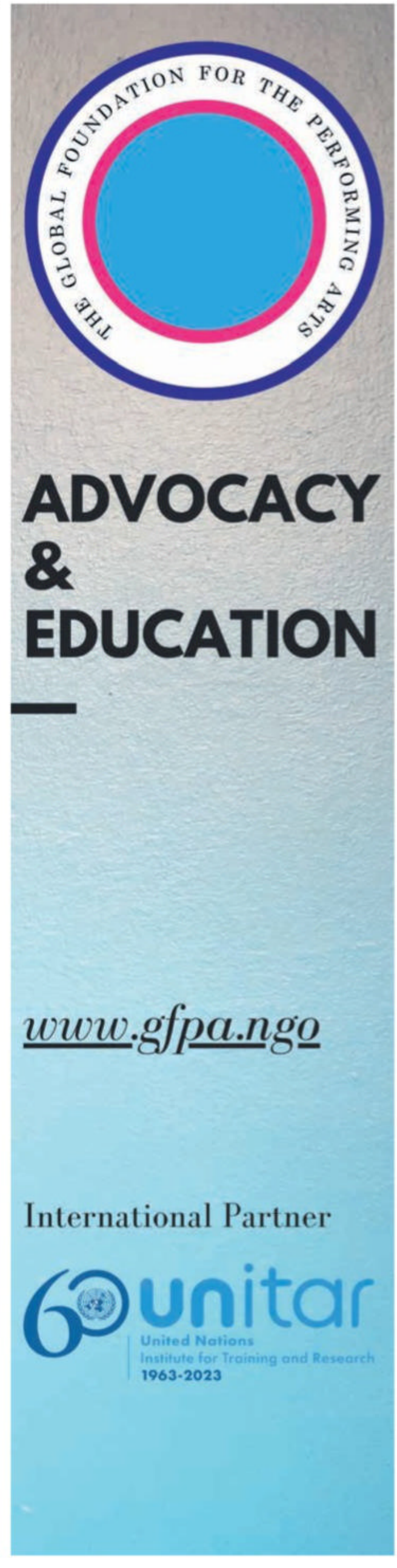
A founding associate of Tokyo's experimental digital band, Yellow Magic Orchestra, whose oeuvre at intervals from 1978 to 1984 became a continuing influence on music that had protracted melodic lines, a strong rhythmic beat, repeated hooks and recurring riffs. In short, electronica.

A lengthy working relationship with British musician, singer and songwriter David Sylvian, who came to the fore in the late 1970s as frontman and lead songwriter of Japan. First working on the track, 'Taking Islands in Africa' from an anthology, *Gentlemen Take Polaroids* (1980). Later the pair hooked up on a double A-side 'Bamboo Houses/Bamboo Music' (1982).

In 1983 Sakamoto reached a crest of commercial visibility. He became something of a brand, not simply by writing the soundtrack for Nagisa Oshima's film *Merry Christmas Mr Lawrence*, but also acting in it (as Captain Yonoi) with David Bowie. The soundtrack secured him a Bafta for best film music. The Sakamoto/Sylvian composition *Forbidden Colours*, a voiced version of the film's main theme, reached the Top 20 in the UK Singles chart

Perhaps most memorably Ryuichi Sakamoto won an Academy Award (alongside fellow composers David Byrne and Cong Su) for his soundtrack to Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* (1987), in which he also had a role. Sakamoto worked with Bertolucci again on *The Sheltering Sky* (1990), and once more on *Little Buddha* (1993). His music for *The Last Emperor* left an indelible impression and enduring mark on an era of electronica.

Emeritus Prof Kit Thompson
Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire



PHOTOGRAPHY: KAUPO KIKKAS

PHOTOGRAPHY: MONIKA RITTERSHAUS

CLASSICAL CUBA

Sarah Willis – BPO horn player and energetic ambassador for classical music – talks to **Andrew Farach-Colton** about salsa dancing, and playing Mozart and mambo

'I never dreamt that this would turn into such a huge project,' says Sarah Willis of the three 'Mozart y Mambo' discs she recorded in Cuba. A member of the Berlin Philharmonic's horn section since 2001 (she was the first female member of that orchestra's brass section), Willis has also achieved something akin to celebrity status as the host of documentary programmes on Deutsche Welle (the German government's international broadcast service) and as a presenter for the BPO's Digital Concert Hall, while her YouTube channel has amassed nearly 60,000 subscribers.

'Being able to explore being a good soloist with my musical family in Havana was –and still is – a very special thing'

'First of all,' she tells me via Zoom from Baden-Baden during a break between rehearsals with the BPO, 'I must say how incredibly grateful I am to Alpha Classics for taking a chance on this project. I'd gone to a couple of the big labels with the idea to record the Mozart horn concertos in Cuba and they said they didn't think they could sell it. I have a feeling they may now be sorry that they didn't take it because it ended up at the top of the classical charts for months. It's been incredible.'

Willis first visited Cuba in 2017 to pursue her love of salsa dancing. 'I'd fallen in love with the Buena Vista Social Club recordings, like so many of us did, and learnt to dance salsa in Berlin, where I studied with a Cuban teacher.' She'd taken ballet classes as a young girl and enjoyed them, but she says that once she hit adolescence she felt awkward and self-conscious. 'I never danced. I wasn't sporty. And it wasn't until I discovered Cuban music that I found music my body wanted to move to; it had never wanted to do that before.'

So, when Willis was in Miami, Florida, working with the horn players of the New World Symphony (a training orchestra for young professionals), she took advantage of the fact that Cuba is just a short flight away. 'You get in the air, open your peanuts and you're there. It's as quick as that.' There was some inevitable culture shock – she describes arriving in Havana as feeling 'like landing on a different planet' – but she was instantly smitten.

Cuba is a magical place for musicians and music lovers, as I myself learnt at first hand when I was there with my family in 2019 as part of a cultural exchange programme. I tell Willis about wandering around Havana and finding people making music on nearly every street corner. And even in some of the smaller towns we visited, the consistent quality of musicianship from singers and players of all ages bowled me over. 'I can't add anything to that,' she says, 'because that's exactly how it is. Music-making isn't something Cubans do as a hobby, it's part of their DNA. Music and dance. And music isn't only made using instruments. There's a kind of music when they're simply talking to one another in the street,' she says in a sudden sing-song voice, 'and they dance in almost every situation – while waiting in a queue for food, or at a bus stop. They're always moving when they're talking. It's just an incredibly musical place.'

She'd gone to Havana to dance salsa at its source, but the long tendrils of the French horn world latched on to her adventure and she was asked to do a masterclass. Then she heard the Havana Lyceum Orchestra and that was that. 'I fell in love with the musicians, the way they make music, and the type of people they are, so I decided I had to do something to raise awareness of this orchestra.' She started with a brief documentary for Deutsche Welle (the first of many, all of which are now available on YouTube), and then – after she found a monument to Mozart in the middle of Havana – came the idea to record the Mozart horn concertos.

'I am not a soloist,' she says, 'and I've never considered myself one. Of course, in a sense, horn players are always soloists because we have the potential to ruin a concert with one note. But standing in front of an orchestra was never something I felt confident enough to do, to be honest.' In fact, apart from some performances of the

Dancing ‘like a Cuban’: when Willis first visited Cuba to pursue her love of salsa dancing in 2017, she met the Havana Lyceum Orchestra – and a unique project was born

Mozart concertos when she was a music student in London, she’d never played them in a professional, public setting.

I tell Willis that I find her trepidation odd given how much of a natural she is on camera, whether she’s hosting a documentary or interviewing, say, John Williams, Wynton Marsalis, Sir Simon Rattle or Gustavo Dudamel. ‘I know. Everybody says the same thing. I seem so confident and outgoing – and I am. I think it has to do with the fact that I started presenting and talking into cameras and communicating about music much later in my professional life. When I was a student learning the horn, I’d have traumas on stage where I was sweating, my knees were knocking and I was absolutely terrified of missing notes. I was the only horn player in my year in school, so I had no friends. I was so lonely as a student, and these things stay in you. So this insecurity is there from an early age and I’ve never managed to get rid of it completely.’

In one of the documentaries made about the first of the ‘Mozart y Mambo’ recordings, Willis talks openly about how she’s affected by impostor syndrome, which shocked me. I confess to her that I suffer from terrible impostor syndrome. Given that she played for a decade in the Berlin Staatskapelle under Daniel Barenboim – she joined just after the fall of the Berlin Wall and was, in fact, the first member of that orchestra to come from the West – and has spent more than two decades with the Berlin Philharmonic, is it possible still to harbour such self-doubt? ‘Oh, it’s worse because I’m in the Berlin Philharmonic,’ she says. ‘The higher you go, the further you fall.’

I’m not happy to hear that Willis suffers so, but there is a strange sense of consolation to discover that even someone at the peak of their profession, as she most certainly is, faces struggles similar to mine. ‘I’m actually really glad you picked up on that comment in the documentary,’ she says, ‘because it’s the absolute truth, and I have no qualms about saying it in public because what I just heard from you is what I hear from students all around the world. They say: “It makes us feel so much better to know that you go through this, too.” I hate to tell them that it’s a lot worse when you’re playing live in the Berlin Philharmonic’s Digital Concert Hall, surrounded by the best musicians in the world. Yes, I made it there, but you still have to keep proving yourself. You’re only as good as your last concert.

‘As for presenting, it’s nothing I’ve ever had any traumatic experience with so I feel much freer doing it.’ The moral of her story, she says, is to work with students on how to manage their insecurities and fears. ‘These days, music schools offer mental training, meditation, yoga and other techniques, and they talk openly about performance anxiety. I think if I’d had that as a student, my life as a horn player might have been a lot easier.’

What gave Willis the ability not only to play the Mozart concertos in public but also to record them was her relationship with the Havana Lyceum Orchestra. ‘With my Cuban musicians, I learnt how much greater our human potential is when we’re in an atmosphere of feeling loved and supported. I learnt that I could be a much better player, a much better soloist. Yes, I’m a good horn player with my orchestra in Berlin, but being able to explore being a good soloist with my musical family in Havana was – and still is – a very special thing.’

I had the pleasure of reviewing the first two ‘Mozart y Mambo’ releases for *Gramophone* and was wowed by her solo playing, describing Willis as ‘a marvellous Mozartian’ whose attention to detail helped to illuminate the music’s operatic character. I was similarly impressed by the elegance and flair of the Cuban selections – some of them riffs on Mozart, while others are drawn from traditional Cuban songs and dances. In her booklet note for the second disc in the series, Willis writes about one of the musicians teaching her the Cuban saying: ‘If you can’t dance it, you can’t play it.’

‘Classical musicians aren’t renowned for their dancing skills or for being big movers,’ she says, ‘but I was lucky because I had a good dancing teacher – a Cuban who thought I was talented. He made me into exactly the kind of dancer he would want his own dance partner to be. So my Cuban friends say I dance like a Cuban. I don’t speak Spanish like a Cuban, but I dance like one simply because that’s how I learnt it. I’ll never be as good as them, of course, because they have it in their blood – you walk around and see these little kids dancing on the street, it’s amazing; but I did learn it really well.

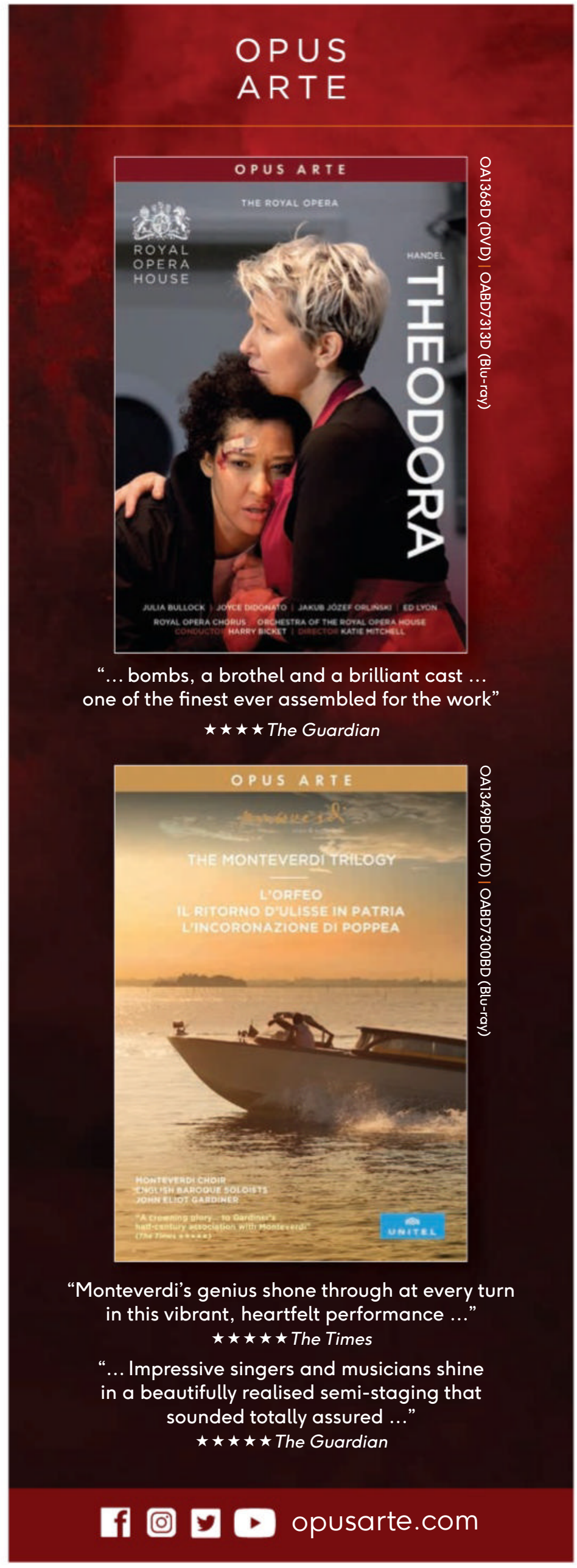
'That wasn't enough for the second album, though, because I wanted to bring something original to the table. The first had been such a success, but we didn't want to simply copy it, and that's where the idea for this new Cuban "horn concerto" came from.' *Cuban Dances*, a suite of six traditional dances, each written by a young Cuban composer, make up this new concerto. 'What they managed to do was to capture the traditional rhythms of Cuba and put them down on paper so that people like me can actually play them. But as I was practising these pieces I realised that even though I could play the notes, I didn't really feel the music. Yes, I could feel the cha-cha-cha and the mambo, but the *guaguancó* and *changüí*? I didn't even know what those were. It was the saxophonist-composer Yuniet Lombida, one of the most important people in the project, who had said: "*Chica*, you know that if you can't dance it, you can't play it," so he put down his instrument and we literally danced all six dances for the next six days. After that, I could play them because I felt them. I learnt that the *changüí* is like dancing salsa with hiccups – it's always off the beat – while the *guaguancó* is all danced in the hips and the knees so it has a more earthy feeling.'

'In order to play Mozart minuets, you should know how dancers at that time would have moved. It's exactly what I'm doing with Cuban music, it's nothing new'

Willis says that to play any music well, you need to know its background. 'If you're going to play Mozart minuets, you should know how dancers at that time would have moved and held their bodies. It's exactly the same as what I'm doing with Cuban music, really; it's nothing new, just a bit more complicated – and so much fun! Improvising is still really hard for me, though, because I've been trained to play exactly what's on the page. Not only that, but horns play in a different key; we always have to transpose, so you're hearing the music in one key but fingering it in a different key. Anyway, I still feel like a stiff classical musician when I'm required to improvise. I have learnt to improvise in singing, though.' And with that, she launches into a few phrases of scat singing à la Ella Fitzgerald. 'But to put that into my horn through my lips and my fingers – well, I'll just say that I have the utmost respect for my Cuban musician friends who can just stand there and play from the heart without worrying about sharps, flats or modulations. I still feel very inadequate in that regard.'

Willis brings the same zeal to teaching others that she does to her own studies and works regularly with students and youth orchestras around the world. In one documentary filmed at a youth orchestra event in Chile, she says to a young musician: 'There's nothing like youth orchestra energy.' I ask her to explain what she meant. 'I started the horn very late, when I was 14. I was lucky that my first teacher was incredibly inspiring and instilled in me a love of music and of the horn. After very few lessons he told me to go and play in a youth orchestra. I'd never played in an orchestra before, and I felt like I was only making these mini-elephant noises with my horn when I practised at home. So I sat there in this orchestra and realised that with my mini-elephant noises I was actually making music with other people. It was a lightning bolt moment and I decided this is what I wanted to do with my life. Then I moved on to better youth orchestras: the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain and the European Community Youth Orchestra.

PHOTOGRAPHY: JOCHEN BECKMANN



With saxophonist-composer Yuniet Lombida and percussionist Enrique Lazaga

With Cuban Dances composers Oliva and Gavilondo and conductor Méndez Padrón

'Youth orchestras have this amazing energy. You know, when I was a young musician, I was a nerd. I loved classical music. I practised in my free time instead of hanging out at the shopping mall like my school classmates. When I met these kids in youth orchestra, they understood me. I didn't have to explain anything. I felt loved and appreciated, and that's what youth orchestras are for. At least, that's what I found – and then I found my Cubans, and it felt very similar.'

I tell Willis of the August I spent in London during my days as a music student in late 1987, and how I went to as many BBC Proms performances as I could, including an amazing concert with Pierre Boulez conducting the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain in Schoenberg's *Gurrelieder*. 'I was there!' she shouts. 'I was playing! When people ask what was the best concert of my life, well, that was definitely one of them.'

'Principal wind players of the BPO joined me in Havana in the middle of lockdown to record Mozart's Sinfonia concertante'

Our conversation inevitably returns to Cuba and I'm eager to find out more about the final instalment of the 'Mozart y Mambo' series. 'The big feature of this last disc is that three principal wind players of the BPO joined me in Havana during the middle of lockdown to record Mozart's *Sinfonia concertante* for winds, K297*b*. To have them there with me was such an incredible experience. My colleagues in Berlin knew about what I was doing in Cuba, sure, but nobody really got it. My friends met the Havana Lyceum Orchestra musicians and worked with them, and they saw the architecture and the amazing light in Havana – all three are complete Cuba converts now.'

The album is entitled 'La bella Cubana' ('the good Cuban'), not only because it features an arrangement of that traditional Cuban song but also because while making the first album the Cuban musicians told Willis that Mozart would have been a good Cuban. 'Now, at the end of this project, they say, "Sarah is a good Cuban," and that's the best compliment I can imagine.'

Willis says that while the project has been an unanticipated success, she hasn't earned a penny. All the money she would have made has gone to help the Havana Lyceum Orchestra. 'I set up a fund called "Instruments for Cuba" because the musicians were playing on really terrible instruments. There were double basses you couldn't tune, violinists were using viola bows, and some instruments were simply falling apart. Now, thanks to this project and to some very generous people, we've been able to provide new instruments. I don't think we in the West realise how terrifying it can be to sit in an orchestra not knowing if your instrument will work. It's hard enough to play the notes in the right place, in tune and with a beautiful sound. That should be our priority.'

Willis's Cuban love affair and the 'Mozart y Mambo' recordings have changed the lives of the Havana Lyceum Orchestra musicians in other ways, too. 'When you were in Cuba with your family in 2019, things were pretty good there, relatively speaking. Then came Covid. Havana went silent – if you can imagine that and how sad it was – and now the country's in a very bad way. Tourists haven't come back. The war in Ukraine means the Russians aren't coming back. They've changed the currency so everything is too expensive for most Cubans, and nothing's coming into the country. "Mozart y Mambo" has helped to finance the families of the musicians, so we've been able to hold on to some hope.'

In other words, I say, Willis has changed people's lives in a meaningful way. 'This has been such a moving experience for me – oh, I think I'm going to cry.' She takes a moment. 'I've never really sat down and thought how much it's changed all of us. I've gained so much confidence as a soloist. I'll always have impostor syndrome, I don't think I'll ever be rid of it, but now I'm ready to go out and find a new project. And the Havana Lyceum Orchestra musicians now believe that they're worth listening to. Many are now studying abroad – we've made that possible. Basically, we've created this family that's very similar to a youth orchestra family. We love and support one another. I don't have any children of my own, but now I have a family of 43 Cubans.' G

The first single from 'Mozart y Mambo' Vol 3 will be released on June 2, with two more to follow before the album itself on September 2

PHOTOGRAPHY: MONIKA RITTERSHAUS

100. Arena di Verona Opera Festival

16. Juni/
9. September 2023

Fondazione
ARENA DI VERONA

OPERA

Aida
von Giuseppe Verdi
Neuproduktion
16. 17. 25. 29. Juni/ 9. 16. 21. 30. Juli/
2. 18. 23. August/ 3. 8. September

Carmen
von Georges Bizet
23. Juni/ 6. Juli/ 11. 24. August/
6. September

Il Barbiere di Siviglia
von Gioachino Rossini
24. 30. Juni/ 13. 22. Juli

Rigoletto
von Giuseppe Verdi
Neuproduktion
1. 7. 20. Juli/ 4. August

La Traviata
von Giuseppe Verdi
8. 14. 27. Juli/ 19. 26. August/
9. September

Nabucco
von Giuseppe Verdi
15. 28. Juli/ 3. 17. August

Tosca
von Giacomo Puccini
29. Juli/ 5. 10. August/
1. September

Madama Butterfly
von Giacomo Puccini
12. 25. August/ 2. 7. September

GALA

Roberto Bolle and Friends
19. Juli

Juan Diego Flórez in Opera – Arena 100
23. Juli

Plácido Domingo in Opera – Arena 100
6. August

Jonas Kaufmann in Opera – Arena 100
20. August

Teatro alla Scala in Arena di Verona
31. August

100 Mal das erste Mal

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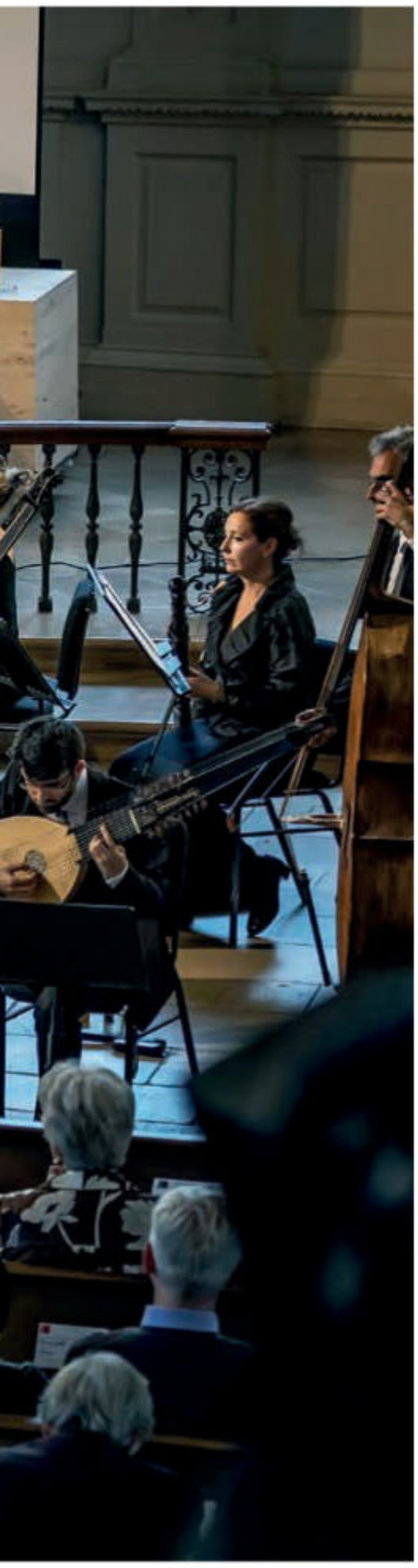
HANDEL FOR ALL

Harry Bicket and The English Concert have embarked on a hugely ambitious project to film Handel's entire catalogue and release it online for free. **Alexandra Coghlan** reports



The English Concert directed by Harry Bicket in Serse at St Martin-in-the-Fields Church, London, May 2022, with Paula Murrihy as Arsamene (left) and Emily D'Angelo as Serse

PHOTOGRAPHY: PAUL MARC MITCHELL

On a sunny afternoon in south London, in the faded splendour of Battersea Arts Centre's Grand Hall, two prostitutes are locked in a ferocious argument. Egging them on are Harry Bicket and the 20-odd players of The English Concert, while the orchestra's co-principal viola ensures that the whole thing is captured on camera.

Handel's *Solomon*, with its two warring harlots and wise king, is one of the first works in the ensemble's sights for a new project so grand and so ambitious that the Queen of Sheba herself might blanch at the prospect. Handel for All will see the composer's entire catalogue – all 42 operas (in concert performances), 29 oratorios, well over 100 cantatas, concertos, and chamber works of all kinds – filmed by the orchestra and released online, where it will exist in perpetuity as a library and archive: freely available to everyone.

It would be a vast undertaking at the best of times. At a moment of economic crisis, with arts funding and audience numbers in the UK more precarious than ever before, it's an extraordinary gesture – a defiant vote of confidence not just in these musicians, but in the future of classical music itself, says principal cellist Joseph Crouch: 'That sense of optimism – that there were enough people out there who were so positive, both about what we do as a group and about the industry itself – was just such a tonic.'

It's a project that was conceived at arguably the lowest moment in cultural memory, at the height of the pandemic in 2020. 'An orchestra is not like an actor who can "rest" for years and still be an actor,' Artistic Director Harry Bicket says. 'An orchestra that's not working, not playing together, not making music, not performing for live audiences, really stops being an orchestra.' His response? It was to double down. 'Whereas many organisations contracted during Covid, we thought: "If this is the end of the orchestra as we know it, what should we do?"

'Of necessity during lockdown we began thinking about the way people were consuming music, and how that was changing. We did a lot of streaming ourselves and invested a lot in equipment, and that was when the idea first emerged to create some kind of digital library or archive. That soon became: "Let's do all of Handel's works." So now we're committed to finding these pieces and performing them all.'

All of them – really? Bicket hasn't done the maths on the project ('I probably should have!'), but there's an initial five-year plan, with every chance of extending beyond. 'It's fascinating for me,' he says, 'because I thought I had pretty much done most of it, but apparently not! One of the advantages about having committed to doing it all is that you're not caught up in debating which pieces you should do: it's a question of logistics, not aesthetics – though there is the question of whether we do every single version of particular works. We want to cover all the material, but without being too academic about it. It's a bit insane, but being ambitious is no bad thing – it's much better than just scrabbling around for the next concert.'

Opera lovers who have followed The English Concert's sold-out series at Carnegie Hall, New York, and London's Barbican – the concerts that launched the group's recent success with Handel – can be reassured that lots of the big-name stage works will be in the early batches: *Orlando*, *Alcina*, *Giulio Cesare in Egitto*. But there will also be plenty of rarities. 'I've always wanted to do *Deidamia* – Handel's last opera,' Bicket admits. 'And also a piece like *Ottone, re di Germania*, which I think has some of the most beautiful music Handel ever wrote, but which is completely impossible to stage. I defy anyone to make it work! Doing it in concert is brilliant as you don't have to suspend disbelief in the same way.' *Jephtha* ('I haven't done it for years'), *Alexander's Feast* and *Belshazzar* ('such a strong piece, and I've never done it') are also firmly in his sights.

Bicket will direct all he can – 'I'm not greedy, though, and I am aware that I can't do it all' – but will hand over the reins for particular performances, such as last summer's *Saul* from the Edinburgh International Festival, directed by John Butt. Principal Guest Conductor Kristian Bezuidenhout will also be stepping forward regularly. Chamber works like the trio sonatas Bicket is happy to leave

'People are doing things every day in performances that just beggar belief' – Joseph Crouch, principal cello

to his musicians – a rare opportunity, Crouch says, and one they've relished. 'It has been such a joy to play with different combinations of people,' he says. 'There is a real familiarity and trust between the players in The English Concert that is really hard to achieve in a freelance context, and I would hope that in these video recordings you'll see that camaraderie, the delight we all take in each other's work. There are people doing things every day in performances that just beggar belief, as far as I'm concerned.'

The choice to make Handel for All a video rather than an audio project is an interesting one for a group with a stellar recording catalogue behind them – particularly at what feels like a watershed moment for the recording industry. The decision, Bicket explains, was twofold, with advantages for both the audience and the musicians themselves. 'It's a slightly sacrilegious thing to say, particularly in *Gramophone*, but I don't love the process of recording. For me, being forced (or that's how it seems) into saying "this is the way I think this piece should go" is not a very natural way of making music. And then, of course, you have producers focusing on tiny details of intonation or articulation, which is important, but in a concert that's not my priority, nor the orchestra's, particularly. If it's all immaculate then that's great, but if it's not, that's fine too. I'm not looking at these performances as a permanent or iconic statement. They represent a snapshot, a moment in time.'

Recordings, Bicket argues, may have given us greater virtuosity and precision, but they've also taken us further away from original principles and context.

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Bicket directs The English Concert from the keyboard at St Martin-in-the-Fields; Emily D'Angelo (far right) is just one of Handel for All's starry line-up of vocal soloists

'We know from Handel's own writings and from commentators like Charles Burney that what was valued above all in performance was a kind of sincerity of utterance,' he says. 'Poor Mrs Cibber, famously, did not have a particularly beautiful voice, but her "pathos" and "dignity" were so highly praised. That's something I think we've lost; we've forgotten what actually moves people, what really makes a performance.'

'On CD there's an expectation of perfection,' Crouch adds. 'On video it's not about that, it's about intensity, a directness of communication. We have to be compelling in everything we do, to try to recreate the experience of hearing this music live. I think that has already helped me to refocus on how things come across, how I communicate them.'

The project doesn't just offer their regular audience a different way of engaging, it also invites in a whole new crowd

Just as contexts and conventions of performance have evolved, so have audiences themselves. A video-based project that's available on demand, from anywhere, that takes you right into the musical action in close-up, even delivering the highlights in convenient pre-edited chunks, doesn't just offer the ensemble's regular audience a different way of engaging, it also invites in a whole new crowd: geographically, demographically and economically.

Crouch compares it to cricket. 'People saw the short form game as possibly being the death of Test match cricket. Now it seems as though the reverse is true: the intensity of short-form cricket has been imported back into the longer game, and there's a real buzz around it.' He points me towards one of The English Concert's most successful videos: a 20-second clip of a double-bass player performing furious semiquaver scales. Hundreds of thousands of people watched it within just a few hours on social media. If even a handful then choose to follow that musician across the archive and discover a full-length concert or opera, that's a win.

'We get over a million hits a year on Spotify, and 10,000 a day on Apple Music,' Bicket says. 'We never see anything like that number at our concerts; I suspect they are two almost completely separate audiences, and that's OK. Video offers people a little window you don't get with a CD – a totally different kind of musical experience. Filming allows us, as a baroque orchestra, to show people spaces they might not otherwise see and to play music that's appropriate to or even associated with that particular building.'

Today the group are in Battersea, but they've already filmed performances at southeast London's Eltham Palace, at Handel's own church in Hanover Square and in the Great Hall at St Bartholomew's Hospital, watched over by a huge portrait of Henry VIII. It's just the start, Bicket hopes. 'You don't have to go far to find all sorts of venues associated with Handel across the UK, whether it's Boughton House in Northamptonshire, Malmesbury in Wiltshire … I'd love to do Handel's anthems from the chapel royal. And what about a sort of Cook's tour of organs for the concertos? I have this wild fantasy that we could do them almost anywhere in the world.'

But while setting is important, the music, Bicket stresses, remains the focus. 'I get driven nuts by endless panning shots of vaulted ceilings while people are playing – it's like someone's attention is wandering, which may be realistic, but doesn't necessarily make for a good experience.'

Viewers can expect a more classic, proscenium-style approach from The English Concert's films – a chance to see the 'physical action and exertion' of performance without too much hyperactive or interventionist camerawork. 'We do old music,' says Bicket, 'music that is hundreds of years old on historical instruments. We can't sex that up beyond a certain degree, nor should we. I think people get that; even if they're not familiar with the music, they can see that it's being done with a level of commitment and skill which you can just sense.'

After an initial year spent building up the digital library, year two (fundraising allowing – to be able to continue, the project

PHOTOGRAPHY: PAUL MARC MITCHELL

Bicket and The English Concert performing at the Barbican, London, in March this year – recreating Handel's 1749 benefit concert in aid of London's Foundling Hospital

will require £350,000 each year on top of the group's usual budget) will introduce a new focus on educational strands. Bicket explains, 'There will be interviews with players and singers, all sorts of people involved in the project. When we do concerts it's always interesting to see the degree to which people are fascinated by period instruments. We call it the "petting zoo" – people come down to the front of the stage to see them close-up. And then there are the scores; lots of them are really just sketches. We see a rhythm and just naturally swing it. It's a whole unspoken musical rhetoric that audiences aren't necessarily aware of. You look at Handel's music on paper and it doesn't give up all its secrets – not in the way that a Stravinsky score does.'

Anyone who has ever dreamt of joining The English Concert will also get the chance, thanks to a 'music minus one' series that allows viewers to turn performer, of playing along with prerecorded orchestral parts – something Bicket himself remembers doing as a teenager with Beethoven piano concertos. 'Handel coincided with the rise in publishing and a new group of middle-class amateurs,' he explains, 'so much of his music is written in such a way that it could be played at home – all those trio sonatas with their interchangeable violin, oboe and flute parts, for instance. Some of them are technically quite hard, but you can still have fun playing them, and that's what it's about.'

'Singing is the most personal art form – it's your vocal cords, it's you. But it's also your soul, your heart. I like singers who reveal something of themselves' – Harry Bicket, director

Education is baked into The English Concert's structure. A fellowship programme with the Juilliard School in New York sees the best student instrumentalists come over to play with the orchestra, and some have since gone on to become regular members, while Bicket's role as Music Director at Santa Fe Opera with its cohort of more than 40 Apprentice Singers ensures a constantly refreshing flow of young soloists. But school-age children are a different, and more difficult, matter. With music education slipping from the curriculum, increasingly palmed off on ensembles themselves, will future students even have the capacity to take advantage of the resources a project like Handel for All offers?

'I don't know,' Bicket admits. 'It's a conversation we're having the whole time. The English Concert has a turnover of £1 million a year, but we only employ three people in the office – it's that lean. If we want to put on an education project with a hundred kids, who is going to do that? Where can we find the resources? But we believe passionately in that kind of work and do what we can, so if we've fundraised to film a performance, then we'll try to bring in a whole load of children for the final run. That way, I'm hoping that we can at least start to draw them in, because – in my experience – kids don't come with any cultural baggage; they are totally open.'

The roster of soloists joining The English Concert for the project is already a starry one. Mary Bevan, Lucy Crowe, Emily D'Angelo, Iestyn Davies, Stuart Jackson: beautiful voices, all, but (crucially) more than that. 'In many ways, singing is the most personal art form,' says Bicket, 'because it's your vocal cords, it's you. But it's not just your vocal cords; it's also your soul, your heart. I like singers who reveal something of themselves.

'I did a lot of work with Lorraine Hunt Lieberson. There was nothing she wouldn't dare to do in terms of the depth of emotion she drew on. Music-making wasn't an escape for her, it was a kind of therapy, a working-through. I think for an audience to have someone who can do that is pretty powerful. There are lots of reasons why someone watches a performance, but I think part of it is because the musician speaks things that can't otherwise be spoken.'

Handel has been at the centre of Bicket's own performing life for an entire career, so the choice of composer for the project was never in question. 'For me, it comes down to the humanity of the way he writes. People always get hung up on the crazy opera plots, but that's not what he's writing about. He's writing about who these people really are, and that's what touches listeners. And he does it with a directness of emotion and a simplicity, with very few notes. Wasn't it Beethoven who said: "If you want to make the biggest gesture with the smallest number of notes, look at Handel"? And OK, so he was a little bit German, but he's just an iconic English composer. If you go to Salzburg you can't avoid Mozart, in Bonn it's all about Beethoven. You come to London and, well … We just don't celebrate Handel in the way any other country would. I think this is an important opportunity for The English Concert finally to do that for this English composer.' G

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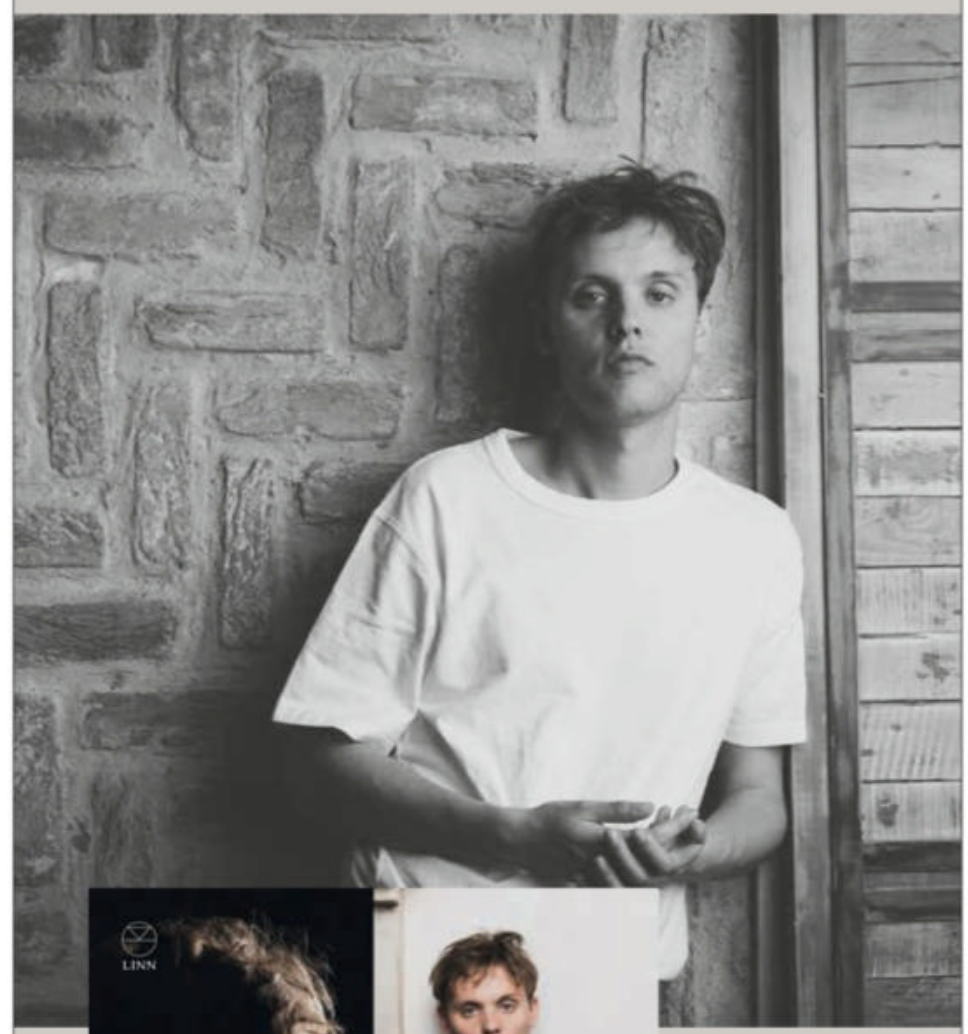

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ANTHEMS ON A GRAND SCALE

The expanding choral department of Merton College, Oxford, has been no stranger to Gramophone's review pages. Now it presents its biggest recording yet, reports **Andrew Mellor**

On November 8, 1655, a 'solemn assembly of sons of ministers', many of them destitute offspring of clergymen suffering under Cromwell's regime, gathered at a service for their benefit at the old St Paul's Cathedral in London. It was the start of what was to become known as the Festival of the Sons of the Clergy, which a 1956 edition of *The Musical Times* cites as 'probably the origin of all music festivals, and in particular of those oratorio festivals which formed such important landmarks in Victorian music-making'.

Not much is known about the music at that 1655 service, though in 1789 Charles Burney noted that in the late 1690s

the annual event included Purcell's *Te Deum* and *Jubilate* in D. In musical terms, the catalyst appears to have been the inauguration of Wren's new St Paul's Cathedral in 1697, at which point the festival's triumphant 'return' to its new home came with a determination to fill that church with sound. The festival got bigger, and it most certainly got louder.

A tradition soon emerged which saw the choir of St Paul's joined by two other cathedral choirs from elsewhere in England, making for a supersize vocal ensemble (the tradition continues today). In the 20th century, the temptation to throw yet more musical resources at the festival – in effect, little more than a colossal church service with a fundraising dinner appended – proved too strong to resist. Orchestras began to appear, for which existing works were orchestrated and bespoke ones were written. The centrepiece of a new album from the choir of Merton College, Oxford, and the Britten Sinfonia is Dyson's well-known Evening Service in D of 1907, dressed in the orchestral garb bestowed upon it by St Paul's sub-organist Douglas Hopkins for the 1935 festival.

In the organ loft of St Paul's for the 300th festival at Wren's cathedral was organ scholar Benjamin Nicholas, now Director of Music at Merton College, Oxford, and the brains behind Delphian's new release 'Orchestral Anthems'. 'The festival always felt like going back in time, experiencing something from another era,' says Nicholas, on a Zoom call from Oxford. His album does much the same, its cover unmistakably channelling 1930s aesthetics and the railway boom that allowed so many choristers from various parts of the country to reach London. What we hear inside is the spirit of England at a particular time: the 20th-century up to and including the coronation – at which, across town at Westminster Abbey, Howells's *Behold, O God our defender* was performed by a choir of 400 and an orchestra perched on the organ screen.

It is a sound that has perhaps survived, beyond coronations and clergyman festivals (the latter shed their orchestras post-war), in the Three Choirs Festival, where liturgical music is still 'performed' with orchestra. 'I suppose in my head I have the nave of Gloucester Cathedral with that big stage and the orchestra and chorus going up in front of it,' says Nicholas. 'It is just a little glimpse of a period of English music, and a rather thrilling one.'

On this recording, Howells's piece was played from a facsimile of the composer's own handwritten score – a sure sign that the repertoire that Nicholas and his student singers are presenting is fresh, if not always new to the catalogue. 'I tried to resist anything that has been regularly recorded,' says Nicholas, 'that's why the Elgar psalm-settings are not there. And there was no point repeating the big Parry works and the Stanford canticles that have been done by Robert King and others.'

Benjamin Nicholas conducts 'Orchestral Anthems' sessions, All Hallows' Gospel Oak, London

Of most interest is the Dyson, getting its first recording here. Many will be familiar with the *Magnificat* as one of the most stolid, hearty contributions to this particular repertoire, rollicking unequivocally in D major and launched by a stentorian organ gambit. The surprise here – as well as the apparent melodic inversion of that opening organ phrase – is how Hopkins's orchestration suggests less an immovable musical edifice and more a piece visited by striking tenderness and even intimacy. The orchestra is assiduously used: echoing horns, woodwind choirs that twist around themselves as if in a Humperdinck opera, flute and oboe solos quizzically echoing phrases, and notable use of pizzicato strings at 'He remembering his mercy'. The *Nunc dimittis* feels even more luminous than normal, ushered into being by quasi-Wagnerian strings.

'It was a revelation for members of the choir, hearing all these works with orchestral colours,' says Nicholas. 'Yes, Gerald Finzi originally wrote *Lo, the full, final sacrifice* for organ accompaniment – and, indeed, for a very fine Romantic organ at St Matthew's Church, Northampton – but when you hear it with orchestra I'm not sure you ever want to hear it with organ again. It's not just Finzi's use of the clarinet, for which he is famous, of course; it's all the other colours he brings into that score.'

'The recording is just a little glimpse of a period of English music, and a rather thrilling one' – *Benjamin Nicholas, conductor*

The other side of that coin is that these devotional works undeniably take on a different identity in orchestral clothing – distinctly unliturgical, for one thing, but perhaps even imperious and a touch jingoistic too. 'I mean, that's possibly true of Elgar's *Ecce sacerdos magnus*,' says Nicholas of the motet orchestrated by the composer to mark the completion of a new Lady chapel at the church of St Catherine of Siena in Birmingham. 'I feel those things in that piece, but I also find it intriguing how it looks forward to Elgar's First Symphony – that walking bass line with a beautiful melody over the top of it.'

The album's booklet notes are disarmingly frank about Elgar's arrangement of Purcell's *Jehova, quam multi sunt hostes mei*, provided for the 1929 Three Choirs Festival in Worcester,

PHOTOGRAPHY: FOXBRUSH.CO.UK

July 2022 sessions: Britten Sinfonia and the choir of Merton College, Oxford, which since 2016 has included girls as well as boys

in lieu of something more significant (and indeed original) from a composer in a creative rut. There will be many who think the work makes heavy weather of Purcell's light and breezy musical ideas, but Nicholas is not among them. 'I actually rather love this,' he counters. 'Yes, it's quite a thick texture and it's obviously conceived for a vast Three Choirs chorus. But there's a great tradition of composers looking back at earlier works and doing something different with them, even up to Thomas Adès and Nico Muhly. My biggest regret is that we couldn't find Elgar's orchestration of Jonathan Battishill's *O Lord, look down from heaven*, another Three Choirs arrangement. I tried every avenue, but nobody can find the parts for that.'

Other big beasts include Vaughan Williams's *Te Deum*, written for the enthronement of Cosmo Lang as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1928, later orchestrated by the composer's pupil Arnold Foster. The orchestra here does little to get in the choir's way, but undeniably adds interest to a score that can seem alarmed by its own profusion of text. Perhaps the most authentic work of all is Elgar's 'The Spirit of the Lord' – the prologue to his oratorio *The Apostles* (1903), in which the presence of the orchestra seems essential to the music's entire concept. 'Elgar was just back from hearing *Parsifal* at Bayreuth,' says Nicholas. 'That is completely apparent from looking at the score; the choir emerges from this wonderful introduction in the strings. Elgar clearly had the sound world of *Parsifal* in his head.'

The Merton College choir sounds particularly refined here, not least in its mellifluous unisons. It is easy to forget how young this institution is, sitting as it does among ancient peers in Oxford. It was in 2008 that the choral set-up at Merton was redrawn, with scholarships introduced and professional leadership brought in to put chapel music-making on a more secure footing. Initially, Nicholas shared Director of Music duties with Peter Phillips, dovetailing work in Oxford with his leadership of the Tewkesbury Abbey Schola Cantorum.

Part of the impetus says Nicholas, in addition to allowing organ scholars to focus more on their studies, was the chapel itself and its renowned acoustic. 'I think Merton just decided they had to do something with this chapel, this wonderful space.' Five years later a colossal new organ was installed, built by Dobson of Lake City, Iowa. As that instrument celebrates a decade in use, Nicholas reflects on the long process of building up a choral tradition, and a particular sound, from scratch. 'It takes many generations of students, and that's not to say that there weren't some super students involved at the very beginning,' he says. As for the sound style of the choir, that came from its surroundings. 'I just tried to listen to the building. Because some things work very well in there and others don't. If you sing something with clarity and ring and real resonance, then the building does the rest.'

The choir's success has been self-perpetuating: the higher its profile, the better the calibre of potential choral scholars it can attract. Award-winning recording projects with Delphian have certainly helped. Nor was the 'Orchestral Anthems' album an isolated occasion: last year the choir released a disc of anthems with orchestra by Howells (alongside Ian Venables's Requiem); it regularly performs the likes of Bach's Passions with orchestra and has, in fact, performed Elgar's *The Apostles* complete with the RPO. 'We want to offer an amazing education to these young singers,' says Nicholas, 'so that during their time here they are introduced to all sorts of

From left: engineer James Waterhouse, producer Paul Baxter, Benjamin Nicholas, soloists William Thomas (bass), Ruairi Bowen (tenor)

repertory that they simply won't have met either at school or in previous lives as choristers.'

These days, that counts for even more young singers. In 2016 Merton became the first college in Oxford to offer a permanent home to girl choristers, who now alternate on top lines with the female adult choral scholars. 'We were mindful of the fact that there are five chapels in Oxford where boys can sing – if you include Worcester and Pembroke, which take boys from Christ Church Cathedral School – but none for girls' (this was before the peripatetic Frideswide Voices were adopted by Christ Church Cathedral).

The 24 girl choristers attend some 12 different schools in the area, coming from as far away as Didcot. 'It's been the most wonderful thing,' says Nicholas. 'It's brought these young people to the college and in return we try to invest in them as musicians. They have their theory lessons here, they eat at the hall here, and we offer instrumental scholarships so they're able to study at least one instrument paid for by Merton. It's more than them just coming and singing the services.' Indeed, the girl choristers travelled to the London church of All Hallows' Gospel Oak to join their adult colleagues for the recording of the Dyson.

Huge developments in the way that the grass roots of church and choral music-making operates will have a fundamental effect on its future

Oxford now has two girls' choirs it didn't have a decade ago – a situation replicated across the UK, where attempts to redress gender inequality between the choir stalls have had a renaissance since the pioneering but sporadic work of choir leaders in Salisbury, Edinburgh and elsewhere. This huge development in the way the grass roots of church and choral music-making operates will have a fundamental effect on its future, so it seems even more ironic to be discussing such things at a time when such uncertainty hangs over the nation's only full-time, professional chamber choir, the BBC Singers. It's a mark of Merton's standing that it had a smattering of alumni among the choir's deputy list. 'It's scandalous,' says Nicholas. 'Why should Britain be the country that has no radio choir when those on the Continent go on, with their unique ability to programme so wonderfully? It's also undeniable that the BBC Singers are an inspiration for our amateur choral scene in the UK. The members of the Oxford Bach Choir [of which Nicholas is Music Director] are always approaching me about what they heard the BBC Singers doing, and having repertoire ideas as a result.'

An optimist might conclude that whatever the state of the top of the choral pyramid, it will be buoyed by the sheer quantities of educated talent emerging from below, thanks to the likes of Merton, Frideswide and so on. At Merton, a college more than 750 years old, they are only looking forward. On the cards is a major new Christmas work by Gabriel Jackson, premiering at St John's Smith Square in December and due to be captured by Delphian straight afterwards. Next will come a disc dedicated to music by Cheryl Frances-Hoad (former Visiting Research Fellow in the Creative Arts at Merton College), works that 'should be heard and should also be widely performed', says Nicholas. By my calculation, these will be respectively the choir's 12th and 13th recordings for Delphian, the label that has been on hand to chart this choir's development from the beginning. G

'Orchestral Anthems' will be released on Delphian on June 23

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FORTHCOMING ON

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1919: Boulanger | Janáček | Elgar | Debussy
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Benjamin Baker and Daniel Lebhardt return to Delphian to present music which emerges from various points in that eventful decade. All of it records vividly a world that was shortly to vanish forever – a world to which the year 1919 was already a coda.

"Benjamin Baker and Daniel Lebhardt are superb partners with a rare passion and energy"
Apple Music

DCD34293
Release Date: 23 June

Unveiled: Britten | Tippett | Gipps | Browne | Thomas
Elgan Llŷr Thomas *tenor*
Iain Burnside *piano* | Craig Ogden *guitar*

Tackling themes of love, shame, acceptance, war and death, tenor Elgan Llŷr Thomas' programme traverses a history of male homosexuality from necessary discretion to the (relatively) liberated present.

Featuring Michael Tippett's ardent *Songs for Achilles* and a short item by W. Denis Browne, (a close friend of the poet Rupert Brooke), as well as premiere recordings of four Brooke settings by Ruth Gipps, this gripping debut concludes with a new song-cycle by Thomas himself, set to poems by Andrew McMillan.

"Welsh tenor Elgan Llŷr Thomas has a golden tenor voice which can weep as well as it can soar"
The Guardian

DCD34297
Release Date: 28 July

Stuart MacRae: Earth, thy cold is keen
Lotte Betts-Dean *mezzo soprano*
Sequoia Duo

In 2021, Stuart MacRae heard a recorded performance by mezzo-soprano Lotte Betts-Dean of *The Lif of this World,* his 2008 setting of an anonymous Middle English lyric. Entranced by the way she shaped its phrases and ornamentation, he immediately began to conceive new works for her voice, solo or lightly accompanied, as well as to bring to completion several other works-in-progress.

This extraordinary flurry of activity – eight vocal works completed in less than two years – is captured here, and reveals the extent to which MacRae's recent music has expanded to embrace folk-like simplicity alongside the modernist techniques of his earlier work. Similar qualities are found in two works for the violin-and-cello duo Sequoia, while MacRae himself appears on harmonium and contributes electronics to two of the vocal solos.

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Briegel Ach, Herr, lehre doch mich **Geist** Die mit Tränen säen **Förtsch** Selig sind die Toten **Hammerschmidt** Ach wie gar nichts sind alle Menschen. Ich hebe meine Augen auf zu den Bergen. Der Tod is verschlungen **T Michael** Die Erlöseten des Herren **Scharmann** Gedenke, Herr, wie es uns gehet **Schein** Ich will schweigen. Selig sind die da geistlich arm sind. Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen **Schwemmer** Die Gerechten Seelen sind in Gottes Hand **Selle** Sinfonia 'Und da der Sabbath vergangen war'

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Ricercar (RIC445 • 79' • T/t)

'It is thrilling to hear Vox Luminis pushing beyond their usual comfort zone of sublimity and really going for it'

Lionel Meunier and Ricercar producer Jérôme Lejeune were working together on Vox Luminis's critically acclaimed recording of Schütz's *Musicalische Exequien* (A/11; deservedly *Gramophone*'s Recording of the Year in 2012) when they observed enthusiastically that some of its elegiac verses correlate to texts in Brahms's *A German Requiem* (1867). Moreover, the 19th-century composer certainly drew some of his inspiration from 17th-century Lutheran church music. For more than 10 years Meunier and Lejeune have gradually researched and devised an ingenious reversal of perspectives. They take the piecemeal scriptures from the Bible and the Apocrypha that Brahms abridged for use throughout his seven movements as the impetus for their own parallel programme of early German Baroque settings of the same (or similar) words for Vox Luminis's 'Ein deutsches Barockrequiem'.

The 19th-century choral warhorse is a starting point for ideas rather than a strictly binding template. Several of the chosen works set longer passages of Biblical texts than Brahms's selective adaptations, and it was not possible to find suitable early musical settings of every verse. There are also a few departures from the Brahmsian model, most notably that Vox Luminis begin and end proceedings with contemplations on death and divine consolation using texts that do not feature in *Ein deutsches Requiem*, but which contain appropriately meditative music that mingles temporal sorrow and divine consolation. Andreas Scharmann's *Gedenke, Herr, wie es uns gehet* (1663) is an exquisite setting of Lamentations 5:15-16 for solo voices, ripieno choir and five-part strings, and Andreas Hammerschmidt's *Ich hebe meine Augen auf zu den Bergen* (1646) provides a solemnly gorgeous conversation between the mellifluous solo tenor Jacob Lawrence and responses from the 10-strong choir doubled by strings.

Otherwise, Vox Luminis perform motets and psalms on texts that follow the scheme of Brahms's texts fairly closely. A brief introductory sinfonia for five-part strings by Thomas Selle leads directly into Johann Hermann Schein's pensive setting of *Selig sind die da geistlich arm sind* (1626), a complete treatment of Christ's Beatitudes (Brahms used only the second line, 'Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted'); solo voices sing with immaculately contoured shading and unforced sweetness. Christian Geist's *Die mit Tränen säen* (1673) is a substantial 11-minute setting of Psalm 126 mingled with a verse from the Wisdom of Solomon and additional poetry. Its long text is substantially different from the shortened lines preferred by Brahms: four soloists contribute

Vox Luminis bring 17th-century Lutheran church music vividly to life

Sincerity of expression: Vox Luminis, with up to 15 voices, string players and organ continuo, perform their programme with eloquence and refinement

PHOTOGRAPHY: MALOU VAN DEN HEUVEL

short arias and ensembles in tandem with three violas da gamba and organ (there is a poignant solo by tenor Raphael Höhn), all performing with honeyed melancholy, and the rest of the assembled vocal group lend expressive weight in *tutti* passages.

No suitable Baroque settings of the texts in Brahms's second movement could be found until the Leipzig Thomaskantor Tobias Michael's madrigalian five-voice motet *Die Erlöseten des Herren* (1634). Sung by 10 voices supported by organ and violone, the final line observing that 'sorrow and sighing shall flee away' is performed with astonishing deftness. The three sections of Brahms's third movement are represented almost word for word in the Darmstadt Kapellmeister Wolfgang Carl Briegel's polyphonic setting of verses from the psalm *Ach, Herr, lehre doch mich* (1671), Hammerschmidt's six-part *Ach wie gar nichts sind alle Menschen* (1646) and the Nuremberg cantor Heinrich Schwemmer's *Die Gerechten Seelen sind in Gottes Hand* (1669); this features softly blissful playing by five-part strings in instrumental passages and also in dialogue with voices. Schein's four-part choral setting of three verses in Psalm 84 (*Wie lieblich sind deine Wohnungen*, 1627) is an antecedent of Brahms's paraphrase of slightly different verses in his fourth movement. However, no suitable compositions could be found to correspond to Brahms's fifth movement, so instead Vox Luminis perform Schein's funeral motet *Ich will schweigen* (1617) – the plaintive cries at its climax sung by all 12 voices with an extraordinary compound of polished precision and fulsome texture.

Hammerschmidt's elaborate double-choir motet *Der Tod ist verschlungen* evokes the Resurrection and Day of Judgement, and culminates in the same two lines from 1 Corinthians that Brahms used to end his sixth movement; the building harmonic richness, modal piquancy and audibly separated exchanges between the two choirs for the recurring exclamations 'Victoria, Alleluia' resemble a gutsy take on Gabrieli – and it is thrilling to hear Vox Luminis pushing beyond their usual comfort zone of sublimity and really going for it. Brahms's finale is a setting of Revelations 14:13 ('Selig sind die Toten'), for which Vox Luminis perform a 13-minute sacred concerto by the Hamburg doctor and singer Johann Philipp Förtsch (*c*1700). This essentially tripartite cantata sounds halfway between late Buxtehude and early Bach, and features several short arias sung mesmerisingly by soprano Viola Blache, countertenor Alexander Chance and bass Sebastian Myrus; the fluidity of interplay between five solo voices, ripieno choir and string ensemble (violins, viols and violone) has almost unworldly refinement. Throughout this meticulously plotted alternative perspective on mostly familiar texts, Vox Luminis's squad of up to 15 voices sing with the utmost sincerity of expression. Even so, special praise must be given to the manifold responsiveness of the string players and Bart Jacobs's intelligent organ continuo realisations. Ⓖ

KEY TO SYMBOLS

②	Compact disc (number of discs in set)	Ⓗ	Historic
SACD	SACD (Super Audio CD)	**T**	Text(s) included
DVD	DVD Video	**t**	translation(s) included
Blu-ray	Blu-ray	**s**	subtitles included
	LP	**nla**	no longer available
	Download/ streaming only	**aas**	all available separately
Ⓡ	Reissue	**oas**	only available separately

Editor's Choice
Martin Cullingford's pick of the finest recordings reviewed in this issue

Orchestral

Charlotte Gardner welcomes the bracing music of Pancrace Royer:
'Most of this music has never been previously recorded. All of it sounds magical' ▶ REVIEW ON PAGE 47

Guy Rickards enjoys contemporary works from Icelandic composers:
'The range of sonorities is viscerally gripping – rushing strings, deep wind notes and percussion fusillades' ▶ REVIEW ON PAGE 51

Bartók

Concerto for Orchestra, Sz116.
Four Orchestral Pieces, Op 12 Sz51
Netherlands Radio Philharmonic Orchestra / Karina Canellakis
Pentatone (PTC5187 027 • 63')
Recorded live at the Muziekcentrum van de Omroep, Hilversum, Netherlands, July 2022

The curtain-raiser somewhat eclipses the main event in this instance. Why we don't hear more of Bartók's Four Orchestral Pieces I cannot imagine – their relative compactness belies a breadth and depth and drama that calls to mind Berg's contemporaneous Three Orchestral Pieces. But we are in the shadows of Bartók's operatic masterpiece *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* here and as the first of the pieces – Preludio – begins to unfold we might be discovering what lies behind the eighth door of the Duke's forever home.

This is a lush, fantastical, heart-achingly beautiful landscape shot through with ineffable sadness. The dark side of Bartók's imagination. The explosive shock of the Scherzo is as unexpected as it is unforgiving (its violence suggestive of that lovelorn Mandarin), the hypnotic night waltz (Intermezzo) is deeply unsettling, and the concluding Funeral March comes close to out-Mahlering Mahler in its intensity. There would seem to be no way out of the darkness.

Karina Canellakis (who wrote the detailed – and impassioned – booklet notes) clearly relates to the ethos of these pieces and the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic Orchestra (impressively engineered by the Pentatone team) paint the soundscapes with both finesse and fire.

I think with the Concerto for Orchestra the key challenge for interpreters lies with striking a convincing balance between the startlingly inventive orchestral showpiece we know it to be and the symphonic drama we want it to be. Canellakis perhaps weighs too heavily on the former, seemingly prioritising form over characterisation. There is atmosphere in the opening pages – though not the kind of crepuscular effect you get from Susanna Mälkki and the Helsinki Philharmonic in their impressive account from a couple of years back (BIS, 12/21). Also those precipitous outbursts, both in the first movement and the searing Elegie, feel slightly cosmetic. I just don't feel their emotional urgency.

The Netherlands Radio Philharmonic are never less than proficient in fulfilling Bartók's demands – the 'lake of tears' limpid and beautiful at the start of the Elegie – but for all the elegance and virtuosity of the playing I want more of Bartók's humour and earthiness. This feels very urbane. The Intermezzo's rude 'interruption' sounds very 'literal', po-faced; the finale, exciting to a point, hardly rips from the page.

Good to hear the Four Pieces done so well but there are better and more emotive accounts of the Concerto for Orchestra out there. **Edward Seckerson**

Brian

Symphonies – No 8[a]; No 9[b]; No 22, 'Symphonia brevis'[b]; No 24[c]
[c]**London Philharmonic Orchestra;** [ab]**Royal Philharmonic Orchestra / Myer Fredman**
Heritage (HTGCD146 • 78')
BBC broadcast performances, [b]March 28, [a]June 27, 1971; [c]April 1, 1973

With this marvellous archival release – specifically that of the Ninth (1951) – of BBC broadcasts conducted by Myer Fredman, all 32 symphonies by Havergal Brian are once again available on CD at the same time. No 9 has not yet featured in Naxos's cycle, and the recordings by Groves (9/78, 9/86) and Del Mar (4/11) are no longer available. Fredman's account is splendid, with interpretative variances to those forebears on disc – although occurring in 1971, between Del Mar's (1959) and Groves's (1976) – from the pacing of the striking introduction to the joyous tintinnabulations of the coda (Brian's most festive ending), and the assurance with which he navigated everything between.

Fredman (1932-2014), an acclaimed exponent also of Bax, understood Brian's music innately and remains one of his finest interpreters (cf also Symphonies Nos 6 and 16 – Lyrita, 9/08), one of the first to convincingly balance Brian's massive orchestral textures despite having no performing tradition to fall back on. Fredman knew how to shape the music, too, as in the alternately bleak and kaleidoscopic Eighth (1949) – this is the fastest of any on disc – or the ultra-concise, coruscating Twenty-Second (1964-65, all 10 minutes of it). So, too, with those heart-stopping melodies Brian was so adept at, such as at 12'43" in No 8, the wistful tune opening No 9's central *Adagio* or the main theme of the long final section of No 24 (1965), one of Brian's most gripping single-movement designs. I well recall the Radio 3 broadcast of No 24 (in 1974, alongside Nos 6 and 16), and being immediately impressed.

These performances, all half a century old or more, still sound extraordinarily vivid and convincing, comparing well with the modern versions directed by Alexander Walker (who also balances Brian's complex sonorities adroitly). Like annotator John Pickard, I regret Fredman never recorded Nos 10 and 23 to complete Brian's two symphonic trilogies. But let's be grateful for what he did set down. **Guy Rickards**

Symphony No 8 – comparative version:
New Russia St SO, Walker *Naxos 8 573752 (11/17)*
Symphonies Nos 22 & 24 – selected comparison:
New Russia St SO, Walker *Naxos 8 572833 (7/13)*

Bruch · Price

Bruch Violin Concerto No 1, Op 26 **Price** Violin Concertos[a] – No 1; No 2. Adoration (arr Gray)[a]
Randall Goosby *vn*
Philadelphia Orchestra / Yannick Nézet-Séguin
Decca (485 4234 • 74')
[a]Recorded live at Verizon Hall, Philadelphia, October 6-9, 2022

Karina Canellakis and the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic Orchestra make a compelling case for Bartók's rarely recorded Four Orchestral Pieces

PHOTOGRAPHY: MARCO BORGGREVE

You can absolutely hear why Randall Goosby has been turning heads with his open-hearted, generous 'school of Perlman' delivery. There's an honesty and modesty – about his playing that stands him apart. It's so refreshing to note an absence of excess in either sound or feeling. This playing isn't dressed to impress but to express.

The European influence and amplitude of the ever-popular Bruch Concerto is our way here to the world of Florence Price and in these live recordings from Philadelphia Goosby has another of her champions – Yannick Nézet-Séguin – acting like a second skin in their shared enthusiasm. But nothing is over-gilded in the Bruch: sound and feeling are one and there is no grandstanding or, one might say, over-projection of the emotion for its own sake. Then again one never doubts Goosby's passion for this music or his in-the-moment response to it, and when finally in the opening paragraph of the first movement the soloist excites the orchestra to its first big *tutti* the fire of the Philadelphia strings is something else.

Before the Price concertos (a decade apart in composition) comes *Adoration* – a popular Goosby encore but here amplified in a lush arrangement for string orchestra and solo violin by Jim Gray. The melody is just plain gorgeous, intensely personal and 'spiritual' in every sense. Goosby's identification with it runs deep.

Price's First Violin Concerto may from time to time reference European models lurking in its shadows (there's more than a hint of the Tchaikovsky in the first-movement coda – indeed it's almost a homage) but Price is very much her own woman and nothing about her feels second-hand. Her ability to 'spin' ideas as a seasoned extemporiser or jazzer is a distinctive characteristic of this big and occasionally, one might argue, somewhat rambling piece. But against that one must weigh the distinctive colour and cast of her folk-inflected melodies and the highly personal way in which she journeys with them. Goosby's identification with the music is so strong that every departure feels like it could be of his own making.

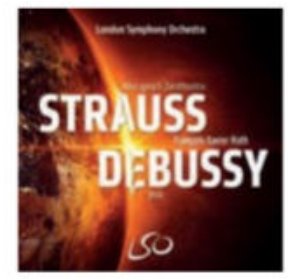
Price's trademark solo trumpet – a plangent, evocative voice – leads off the 'spiritual' reverie of the slow movement and it is a measure of her individuality in my brief acquaintance with her music that I would be able to identify her from the first measures alone.

Concerto No 2 is a more exotic specimen, flecks of celesta immediately lending it a hothouse feel. But the compression and concision of it (15 minutes in a single span of music) and again its improvisational manner make for something you might describe as 'stream of consciousness' with Goosby seizing upon phrases so ravishing that you wonder where they've been all our lives.

Edward Seckerson

Debussy · R Strauss

Debussy Jeux[a] **R Strauss** Also sprach Zarathustra, Op 30[b]
London Symphony Orchestra / François-Xavier Roth
LSO Live (LSO0833 SACD • 50')
Recorded live at the Barbican Hall, London, [a]January 25, [b]November 13 & 14, 2018



François-Xavier Roth has released recordings of both of these works before – the Strauss recorded a decade ago with the now defunct SWR Sinfonieorchester

Baden-Baden und Freiburg and the Debussy with Les Siècles in January 2018. Thus it's unsurprising that this LSO *Jeux* is the closest to his earlier account, given that it was also recorded in January 2018.

The timings in the Debussy are near-identical and the work's mixture of the playful and the erotic is expertly captured, its narrative vividly conveyed. And while the LSO can't quite match the dappled colourings created by the period instruments of Les Siècles, they come close with playing of real refinement and delicacy. It's a lovely performance.

This *Also sprach*, too, is every bit as fine as its coupling. It's a performance of almost head-spinning swagger. It's also fast by the clock: Roth brings us in at around 31'30", nearly three and a half minutes swifter than Santtu-Matias Rouvali in his recent Philharmonia performance, for example (Signum, 5/23).

The gripping opening sunrise sets the tone, with the conductor ever so slightly speeding up through each iteration of the trumpet motif, to thrilling effect. Other moments that call for pulsating energy and Straussian *Schwung* are excitingly done, with the LSO on fearlessly virtuoso form – listen to the swirling passage that takes us into 'Der Genesende', for example.

I wondered if the 'Tanzlied' could have done with a bit more relaxation (an impression amplified by LSO Live's somewhat close sound), but it's at one with the urgency of the reading. The introspective moments, meanwhile, are beautifully done, with the conductor creating the necessary space. The strings' slow build-up in 'Von den Hinterweltlern', the slow ebbing away of life force in 'Das Grablied', the numb fugue of 'Von der Wissenschaft' and the hushed uncertainties of 'Das Nachtwandlerlied': all beautifully done. As with his earlier recording, Roth never loses sight of the work's structure, tying everything together with the surest of touches, but this new account adds to that a new and thrilling energy and sense of excitement. Highly recommended.

Hugo Shirley

Debussy – selected comparison:

Siècles, Roth *Harmonia Mundi HMM90 5291 (12/18)*

Strauss – selected comparison:

SWR SO, Roth *Hänssler Classic CD93 320 (12/14); SWR Classic SWR19426CD (5/21)*

Haydn

Symphonies – No 101, 'Clock'; No 103, 'Drumroll'

The Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen / Paavo Järvi

RCA Red Seal (19658 80741-2 • 54')

The secret of comedy is all about – wait for it – timing. Joseph Haydn knew this and so too does Paavo Järvi, judging by this first instalment of the 'London' Symphonies with The Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen. Haydn peppers his scores with pregnant pauses and Järvi, a dry wit, times them to perfection before delivering the punchlines. He can keep the straightest of faces, but his Haydn is never po-faced in the manner of some big-band conductors. I smiled throughout these performances of Nos 101, the *Clock*, and 103, the *Drumroll*.

Järvi's Bremen 'big band' are pretty good mimics, too, slipping into period-instrument disguise with ease. Their playing has a lithe, nimble quality but the sharp accenting and abrasive brass and timpani punctuation underline a real period feel in these performances, particularly in the robust acoustic of the Regentenbau in Bad Kissingen. In this, they are following in the footsteps of other German orchestras on disc, particularly the SWR Stuttgart under Roger Norrington and the Heidelbergers and Thomas Fey. Revisiting those earlier accounts, Fey's 'London' Symphonies aren't quite as unbuttoned as earlier discs in their Hänssler series. Norrington, though, is at his impish best in Stuttgart, delighting in making mischief.

Both Bremen performances brim with life. After the *Adagio* introduction to No 101, Järvi launches a sprightly *Presto*, with lively antiphonal violin exchanges. In the famous *Andante*, the clock ticks at a purposeful pace rather than Norrington's whirr, with clipped phrasing, all very debonair, and gorgeous flute articulation. And at 4'36", listen for one of those humorous pauses. The Minuet feels slightly heavy but the finale is taken with a swagger.

After the timpani roll that announces No 103, giving the symphony its *Drumroll* nickname, the *Allegro con spirito* is zippy. There's more Haydnesque humour in the second movement, a wink and a smile, and some fruity horn drones. The Minuet really dances this time, as airy as a meringue, and Järvi outpaces Norrington in the lickety-split finale, a joyous explosion from a slightly rebellious timpanist to bring things to an ebullient close. This could well be a Haydn series to relish.

Mark Pullinger

Selected comparisons:

SWR RSO, Stuttgart, Norrington *Hänssler Classic CD93 252 (3/10)*

Heidelberg SO, Fey *Hänssler Classic HC16001 (5/18)*

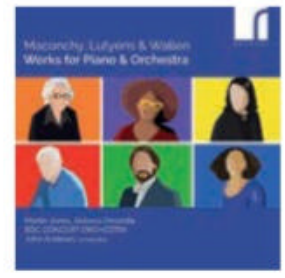
Lutyens · Maconchy · Wallen

Lutyens Eos, Op 101[a]. Music for Piano and Orchestra, Op 59[a] **Maconchy** Dialogue[a] **Wallen** Piano Concerto[b]

[a]**Martin Jones,** [b]**Rebeca Omordia** *pf*

BBC Concert Orchestra / John Andrews

Resonus (RES10315 • 59')

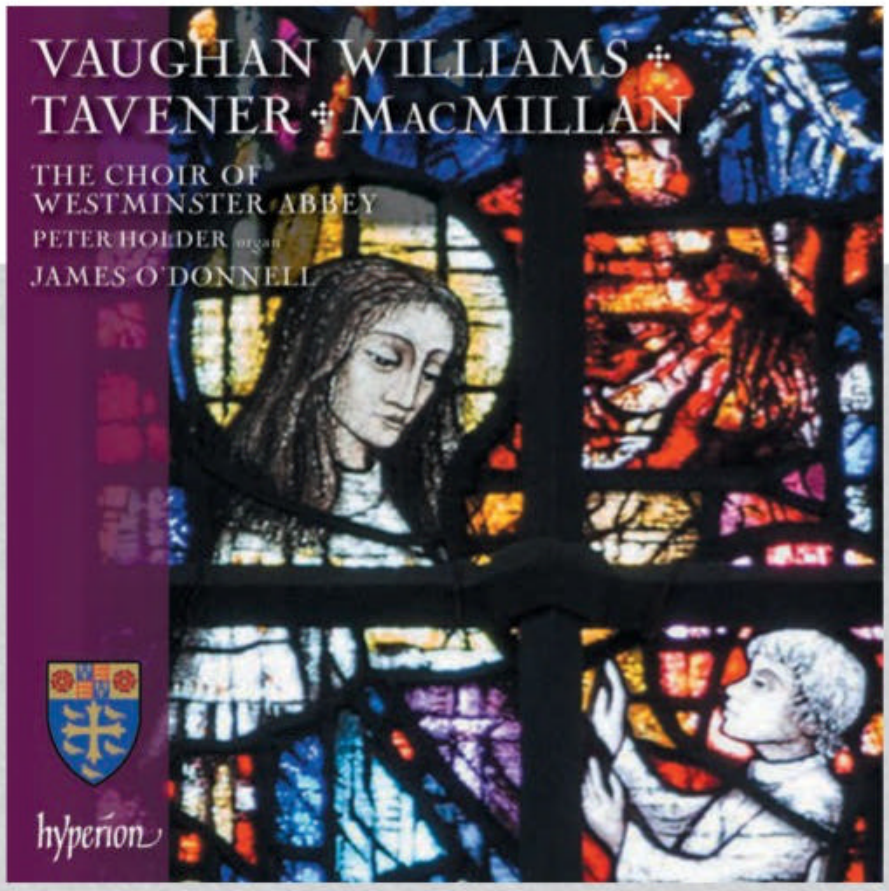


Elizabeth Maconchy composed three works for piano and orchestra, including two concertinos (Lorelt, 1/12; Lyrita, 6/22). *Dialogue* (1940-41) lies midway between but, while sharing some similarities of style with them, eschews their neoclassical demeanour and elements of display. The clue is in the title: soloist (here the excellent Martin Jones) and orchestra discuss rather than debate with no element of competition, more in the manner of chamber music. *Dialogue*'s dark, full scoring gives it a different colouring and more serious sound world, despite occasional reminiscences of her former teacher, Vaughan Williams, to the concertinos.

The pair of Lutyens works featured here are strongly contrasted. In the evocative *Eos* (1975), named for the ancient Greek 'personification of dawn' and sister of Helios, the piano is integrated within the ensemble. *Eos* is, arguably, the nearest thing to a tone poem in Lutyens's catalogue and utterly different from *Music for Piano and Orchestra* of a decade earlier. Its severe textures, abstract lines and at times glaring focus on the piano as the primary element in its discourse are rendered with precision and sensitivity by Jones.

Rebeca Omordia takes over the keyboard for Errollyn Wallen's very recent (2020) Piano Concerto. Opening with more than a nod to Ravel's G major, it quickly shifts idiom, especially in the complex second movement (almost as long as the other three combined), into jazz and the blues. The finale, 'Joyful', shifts again to folk music, with a *sârba* from Omordia's home town in Romania. Wallen is an accomplished pianist in her own right, so her writing is beautifully laid out for the instrument. Omordia has its measure, as well as Wallen's coruscating expressiveness. The BBC Concert Orchestra, relishing the chance to stretch themselves with something weightier than their normal repertoire, provide spot-on accompaniments throughout under John Andrews's firm direction. Resonus's clear sound is splendid.

Guy Rickards



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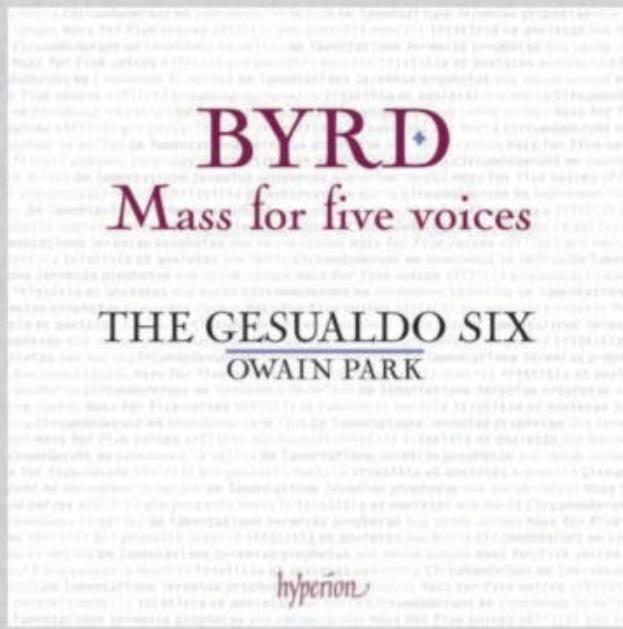

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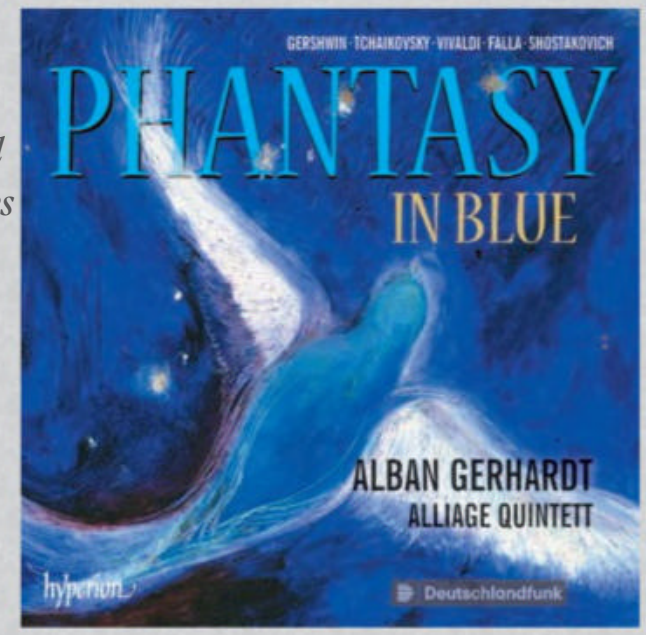

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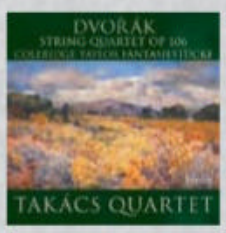

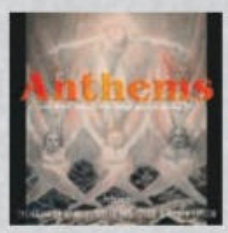

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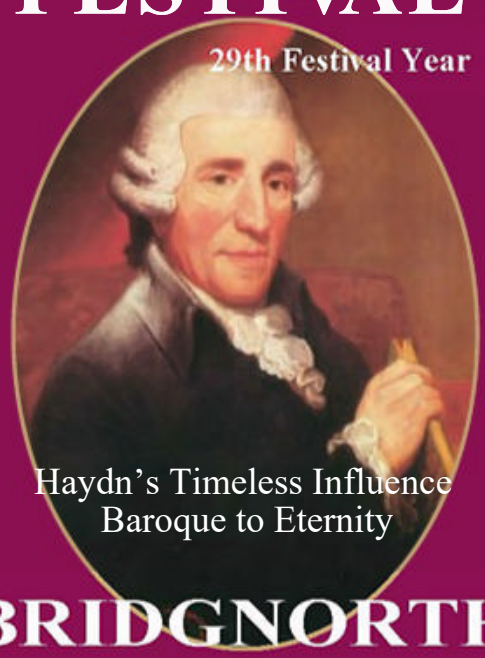

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Mahler

Symphony No 5

Montreal Symphony Orchestra / Rafael Payare

Pentatone (PTC5187 067 • 68')

The sparkiest Mahler of recent years has not come from the usual suspects. Alexandre Bloch's Orchestre National de Lille immortalised their deft, propulsive Seventh Symphony on the far side of the pandemic (Alpha, 11/20). Now from Francophone Quebec comes a generally upbeat Fifth from Rafael Payare and the Montreal SO. The Venezuelan hornist turned conductor is scarcely unique in touring and now recording one of his party pieces. But Pentatone, the Netherlands-based label with its own old-school, Central European Mahler cycle in train, is taking a long-term punt on the success of this newly established partnership. In today's market conditions such commitments are not undertaken solely on the basis of big hair.

Sonic factors really matter here. In Charles Dutoit's time the Montreal orchestra was synonymous with diaphanous Gallic fare and Decca sound engineering brought together in the acoustic of Saint-Eustache. Today's players make a darker, more immediate impact in the Maison Symphonique opened in the course of Kent Nagano's tenure. Articulation in all departments is firm and true. The antiphonal placement of first and second violins, audibly adding value to parts of the score, entails no loss of heft in unison passages. Returning to Leonard Bernstein (DG, 8/88) for the *n*th degree of emotive force or to Claudio Abbado (EuroArts, 9/05) for the most elegant elucidation of Mahler's contrapuntal fabric, one notices that neither enjoys comparably modern recorded sound. True, under Payare, the tam-tam goes AWOL in the final climax of the second movement. The subdued pizzicato pay-off at the end of the first is presumably evidence of scholarly intervention. Simon Rattle, who also divides his violins, plays down that effect (EMI/Warner, 12/02); Bernstein is explosive, Abbado somewhere in between. Then again the entire funeral march is relatively low-key, its opening fanfare crisp, almost businesslike. There will be give and take but not much rubato, maybe not enough for some.

Intensity, inflection and colour build as the performance proceeds. In a central Scherzo with real pizzazz, Payare and/or his technical team part company with Rattle in choosing not to spotlight the obbligato horn. The *Adagietto*, fashionably flowing, manages to accommodate plenty of portamento and affectionate phrasing. Gone is the portentousness associated with the movement's deployment for Robert Kennedy's funeral, Luchino Visconti's *Death in Venice* and Todd Field's *Tár*. The finale again avoids heaviness, generating real excitement even if the return of the brass chorale from the second movement is not intended to overwhelm the listener.

Helpful annotations include some observations from the conductor. Rather than dwelling on his time with the Simón Bolívar Orchestra (Payare will have played the symphony a good deal under the comparably dynamic direction of Gustavo Dudamel), he advances his own take on 'music brimming with exuberant energy, hope and a deep love of life'. This is a Fifth that sparkles and – with all due respect to Cate Blanchett's Lydia Tár – there will be many more mountains to climb. Recommended.

David Gutman

Nielsen

Violin Concerto, Op 33[a]. Symphony No 4, 'The Inextinguishable', Op 29

[a]**James Ehnes** *vn*

Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra / Edward Gardner

Chandos (CHSA5311 • 68')

The booklet notes remind us that this was the exact pairing of works that Carl Nielsen chose for his one and only London concert appearance. The critic of the day was not impressed with the Violin Concerto – but for all the reasons that make it so appealing to me personally. You could never second-guess Nielsen: he loved subverting convention and wrong-footing his audience. And this intriguing piece is, like so much of his work, an awfully big adventure.

The soloist's dramatic declamation at the outset might suggest that the cadenza has landed prematurely – attention will be paid, sinews stretched, but only to melt into a gorgeous lyric idea which might or might not be the first or even the second subject. And then again what does that make the chivalrous *allegro* arriving better late than never? And how come the short middle movement searches for but never actually finds a tune worthy of shaping into an actual slow movement?

James Ehnes – that most elegant and unflashy of players – seems to relish all that is unexpected about the piece, embracing the digressions and non sequiturs and accentuating the many volte-faces between the stern and the sweet. Edward Gardner and the Bergen Philharmonic give it real backbone and play like its greatest champions.

They are splendid, too, in the elemental Fourth Symphony, *The Inextinguishable*, though I do wonder how much more positive I would feel about this performance had I not been so utterly wowed by the recent cycle from the Danish National Symphony Orchestra under Fabio Luisi. Gardner's great strength is his way with architecture – and he absolutely capitalises on Nielsen's dynamic extremes from barely tangible 'no man's land' *pianissimos* to the many volcanic upheavals.

It's always hard to believe that that seemingly unassuming theme in the clarinets from the early stages of the first movement will evolve as it does into something so immense and magisterial. Gardner terraces the big *tuttis* expertly giving them shape, inner clarity and a real sense of direction. Balances are exemplary. And there's the mighty contrast he draws between the elegant gavotte of the second movement (mellifluous Bergen woodwinds) and the searing intensity of the strings and timpani-led slow movement. But am I perhaps more conscious of Gardner's way with the mechanics of the music than I am with its spontaneous combustion? Is the reading held on too tight a rein? Perhaps.

But Nielsen himself clearly liked the coupling and you won't go far wrong with either performance. It's just that I am somewhat fixated on the Luisi set of the symphonies and that Fourth is on a whole other level.

Edward Seckerson

Symphony No 4 – selected comparison:

Danish Nat SO, Luisi DG 486 3475 (2/23); 486 3471

Rachmaninov

Piano Concertos – No 1, Op 1; No 4, Op 40. Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op 43

Boris Giltburg *pf* **Brussels Philharmonic Orchestra / Vassily Sinaisky**

Naxos (8 574528 • 81')

One does not usually start these reviews with a critique of the booklet but I must make an exception. Written by the pianist himself, it gives the (detailed) story behind each of the three works, as you would

expect, but also offers an impassioned and enthusiastic apologia for the comparatively neglected First and Fourth Concertos, and provides timecodes for many of the salient moments in each movement. To have such a thoughtful, personal and congenial essay from the soloist is rare indeed. I cannot, in short, imagine a better written introduction to these three masterpieces for the newcomer or experienced pro. I must add that Naxos helpfully gives different tracks for each of the Rhapsody's 26 sections (it isn't always the case).

The performances and recording are of the same standard. Throughout this superb disc, Giltburg is a joy to hear, lightly pedalled, consistently on the qui vive, weaving and darting, with a delicious *leggiero* touch and crystal-clear articulation. When Rachmaninov asks for *staccatissimo* (as, for example, in the last movement of the F sharp minor First Concerto) or *vivo scherzando* (in the first movement of No 1 and the sparkling solo Var 15 of the Rhapsody) Giltburg responds with alacrity. The Rhapsody must be one of the wittiest accounts on disc. Occasionally, the forwardly placed Fazioli means that a few passing details are obscured: in the Rhapsody I missed the cheeky little first violin quips of the main theme in Var 7, and the campanella's subtle 'Dies irae' quotes in Var 10. But these are hardly dealbreakers.

What depth of tone he brings to passages such as the cadenza of No 1, yet even Giltburg cannot quite muster the same anguish and desperation that Malcolm Binns brought to it in 1968 on World Record Club (3/68 – when will this be reissued?). As for the central movement of the Fourth Concerto (heard in its final 1941 version, incidentally, which the pianist argues persuasively to be the best and most effective), in Giltburg's hands no longer is it 'variations on *Three Blind Mice*' but a profound contemplation on the first subject of Schumann's Piano Concerto.

With Vassily Sinaisky rousing the Brussels Philharmonic to play at the top of their game (there is some lovely woodwind-playing along the way), these are among the finest accounts of these works alongside Wild, Shelley, Hough and of course the composer himself.

Jeremy Nicholas

Rachmaninov · Silvestrov

Rachmaninov Piano Concerto No 3, Op 30[a]. Symphony, 'Youth'[b] **Silvestrov** The Messenger[c]
[ac]**Anna Fedorova** *pf* [b]**St Gallen Symphony Orchestra / Modestas Pitrėnas**
Channel Classics (CCS45023 • 69')

For her many fans, the young Ukrainian pianist Anna Fedorova is a champion of Rachmaninov, and her performance of his Second Piano Concerto alone has garnered over 38 million views on YouTube. Although this statistic might suggest that she is some kind of pop-classic performer, she is quite the opposite, with a serious and searching attitude to the music, never content just to skim the surface, and steering clear of mere flashy virtuosity. She clearly strives to add her own personal touches to this over-played and over-recorded piece. With her new recording of the Third, she has now completed her set of the complete Rachmaninov concertos for Channel Classics – naturally, she left the greatest challenge to the end.

As with her interpretation of the Second, there are plenty of personal touches in her Third: she delivers many passages in a playful or even whimsical spirit, uses rubato freely and generously, and finds opportunities for unusual phrasing and accentuation, all supported with sensitivity and precision by Modestas Pitrėnas conducting the St Gallen Symphony Orchestra. This approach gives us a succession of golden moments, but these do not add up to a coherent and compelling account of the whole. Rachmaninov, admittedly, tempts the soloist with a characteristic abundance of ideas, but other pianists have found an overarching logic to the piece. Even at the climax of the finale (starting at 14'28"), which can be powerfully propulsive, Fedorova is in danger of grinding to a halt. The liberties she takes in her rendition of slower episodes seems to be at odds with her strict, regimented approach in faster passages, as if two different interpretations are competing with each other. The sound on the discs does not help matters: it seems rather monochrome and 'domestic', which undermines any sense of heroism and grandeur that we would expect of this concerto.

In Rachmaninov's rarely performed 'Youth Symphony' (a single *allegro* movement written when he was 18), Pitrėnas prioritises clarity over drive, which may not be the best way to convince sceptical listeners that this dramatic, Tchaikovskian piece is a worthwhile addition to the repertoire. There is a solo piano encore, *The Messenger* by Valentin Silvestrov, which ends the album on a ruminative and poignant note, reminding us that it was made in a time of war. **Marina Frolova-Walker**

Respighi

Ancient Airs and Dances – three suites. Gli uccelli
Liège Royal Philharmonic Orchestra / John Neschling
BIS (BIS2540 SACD • 76')

This latest release of Respighi's orchestral works completes the series of recordings by BIS that have been conducted by John Neschling with, for the most part, the Orchestre Philharmonique Royal de Liège, the ensemble pictured in the booklet in the foyer of their concert hall, looking as though they are having the time of their lives. And well they might, for this coupling strikes me as the most desirable of the many that have preceded it, a route taken first by Antal Dorati and his orchestra of expatriate Hungarian musicians in 1959. Prior to that, Respighi's posthumous standing in the post-war world was seen through the prism of his 'Roman Trilogy', of which *Roman Festivals* drew the opprobrium of the authors of the *Record Guide* (1955), who declared that 'the whole thing might have been commissioned by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer'. My, how have times changed!

I admire the way Neschling acknowledges that life in the 17th century, from where Respighi drew the source material for his *Ancient Airs and Dances*, proceeded at a different tempo to ours. His affection for and pacing of each number is never more apparent than in the 'Italiana' from Suite No 3, where the string-playing would melt any heart. And just hear those expressive turns from oboe, violin and viola in the 'Villanella' from Suite No 1. In the opposite vein, the orchestra kick up a storm in the 'Bergamasca' from Suite No 2, taken at a brisk pace, where the country folk are clearly having a whale of a time, their step infectious, with each section of the orchestra a marvel of precision, the conductor keen to follow the composer's tempo directions.

In *The Birds*, Respighi, the master musical painter, captures every humorous device to portray his eccentric and personable aviary, and his orchestra respond in kind. On this showing, it has a good claim to be Respighi's masterpiece.

The BIS engineers ensure that every detail of Respighi's fabulous orchestration lands, without falsification, from *ppp* to *fff*, from fore to aft. It's a fitting finale to an outstanding series. **Adrian Edwards**

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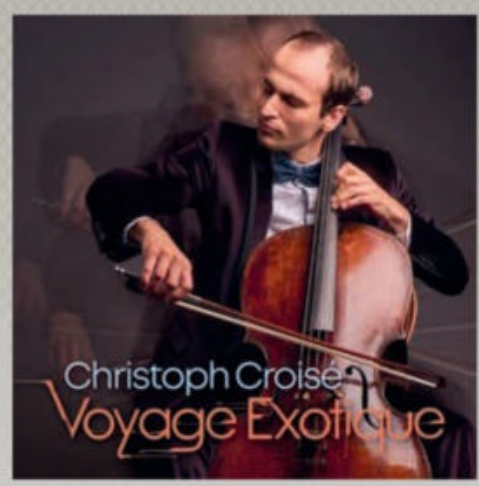

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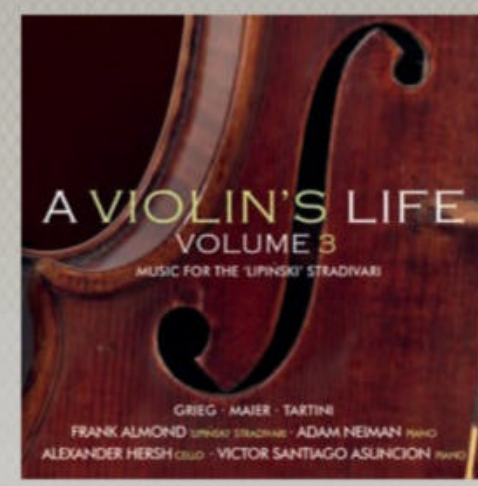

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ZURICH

Rota

Castel del Monte[a]. Concerto for Strings. Harp Concerto[b]. Orchestral Rehearsal – excerpts. War and Peace – film music suite

[a]**Marcel Sobol** *hn* [b]**Esther Peristerakis** *hp*
WDR Funkhaus Orchestra, Cologne / Felix Bender, [b]**Michael Seal**

Capriccio (C5494 • 84')

This generously filled album brings together a selection of concert works and film music by Nino Rota. Such is the quality of invention and finish of the soundtrack pieces that they rarely seem inferior to their ostensibly more serious companions, themselves distinguished by the composer's talent for lyricism and communicative immediacy.

Completed in 1947, the Harp Concerto features an effective combination of rhythmic ingenuity and orchestral colour. Especially memorable are the fanfares for solo trumpet and horn in the slow movement. The warmth and luminosity of the writing here contrast strongly with the darker tone of the Concerto for Strings, commissioned by the chamber orchestra I Musici and completed in 1965. Here, a greater seriousness of purpose and an element of sardonic humour make themselves felt in a four-movement work with a duration of slightly over 15 minutes. The third concert work, *Castel del Monte*, dates from 1974 and is a mysterious and atmospheric evocation for horn and orchestra of the castle in Andria in south-eastern Italy from which it takes its name.

Rota's score for King Vidor's 1956 Italian-American film epic *War and Peace* is represented here by a suite of 11 numbers amounting to about 30 minutes of music. The theme for Andrei and Natasha is one of Rota's finest inspirations, and while some of the pieces do little more than evoke a mood, both the Polonaise and Natasha's Waltz are musical conceptions of the highest quality. Only three items from Fellini's 1978 satirical film *Orchestral Rehearsal* are included but all are strikingly vivid, none more so than the Galop, a riotous dance that sounds as if might have wandered in from a Khachaturian ballet.

The quality of all the performances is first-rate and the recording is clear and well balanced, albeit slightly lacking in warmth. Strongly recommended to anyone not yet familiar with Rota's output, and to those who already are.

Christian Hoskins

Royer

'Surprising Royer'

Orchestral suites from Almasis, La pouvoir de l'Amour, Pyrrhus and Zaïde, reine de Grenade

Les Talens Lyriques / Christophe Rousset

Aparté (AP298 • 81')

Pancrace Royer (1703-55) may be long recognised as one of the French Baroque's most significant harpsichord composers but his orchestral music is arguably not much better known today than it was in 1992. That was when publication of *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera* sparked the first modern editions and performances of *Zaïde, reine de Grenade* (1739) and *Le pouvoir de l'Amour* (1743), the two *opéra-ballets* in which most of his orchestral suites and overtures sit. And it's hardly surprising, when those two sumptuous stage works remain the preserve of French 18th-century opera specialists. Still, it's probably precisely from such a specialist that many would ideally wish to get their first hearing of this music. Also, ideally, someone with an intimate, player's knowledge of Royer's harpsichord works. In other words, someone exactly like Christophe Rousset, whose existing all-Royer recordings are his two harpsichord recitals (L'Oiseau-Lyre, 9/93; Naïve, A/08), between which came his and Les Talens Lyriques' 'Tragédiennes' recital with Véronique Gens (Erato, 8/06), featuring selected Royer arias.

The disc in hand presents not only the substantial body of instrumental music from *Zaïde* and *Le pouvoir de l'Amour* but also pieces from *Pyrrhus* (first performed in 1730 to celebrate the birth of Philippe, duc d'Anjou) and the shorter 1748 work *Almasis*. Most of it has never been previously recorded. All of it sounds magical. Les Talens Lyriques really seal the deal, through their crisply luminous, lovingly shaped and expressed readings. Whether it's an exuberant, brass-rich, bouncing gallop or softly cooing, slowly trilling, legato woodwind, the whole is dispatched with *en pointe* brilliance, shimmering with stage frisson. With such vibrantly visual-feeling and dramatically taut playing, there's the constant feeling of being on the verge of a singer striking up an aria or a dancer leaping into view – which of course doesn't happen. Still, this is at least a nice 'issue' to have to get your head around. Add the warm bloom of Paris's Notre-Dame-du-Liban underpinning each chordal explosion with a satisfying degree of plumply reverberating thwump, and if you're after a shot of musical caffeine, then here it is.

Charlotte Gardner

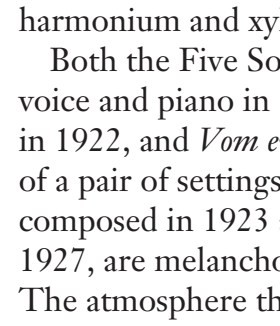
Schreker

Chamber Symphony. Der ferne Klang – Nachtstück. Fünf Gesänge[a]. Kleine Suite. Romantische Suite. Valse lente. Vom ewigen Leben[b]

[b]**Chen Reiss** *sop* [a]**Matthias Goerne** *bar* **Berlin Konzerthaus Orchestra / Christoph Eschenbach**

DG (486 3993 ② • 127' • T/t)

Recorded live at the Konzerthaus, Berlin, March & May 2021, May & June 2022



Given the limited representation of Schreker's music in DG's catalogue, the release of this excellent double album of works by a composer whose operas once rivalled those of Richard Strauss in popularity in the German-speaking world is most welcome. The works included here cover almost the full extent of Schreker's career, ranging from the *Romantic Suite* (the Intermezzo of which was composed in 1900 when Schreker was 22) to the *Kleine Suite* of 1928, written for radio broadcast and scored to accommodate the limitations of the technology at the time.

The playing of the Berlin Konzerthaus Orchestra under Christoph Eschenbach is both meticulously prepared and wonderfully idiomatic. The performance of the *Romantic Suite* is the finest I've heard, bringing radiance and emotional depth to a work completed in 1903 before Schreker's individual style had fully developed. The short but poetic *Valse lente* of 1908 also enjoys a captivating performance. The refinement and eloquence of the orchestra's playing are heard to particularly fine effect in the *Kammersymphonie* of 1916, a work brimming with lyrical invention and bewitchingly scored for a small body of instruments including celesta, harp, piano, harmonium and xylophone.

Both the Five Songs, composed for voice and piano in 1909 and orchestrated in 1922, and *Vom ewigen Leben*, consisting of a pair of settings of Walt Whitman composed in 1923 and orchestrated in 1927, are melancholy, inward works. The atmosphere that Schreker's scoring conjures in the second of the Whitman settings is extraordinary, and this profound and haunting work is surely one of the composer's finest achievements. I marginally prefer Chen Reiss's performance here to the fine recording by

GRAMOPHONE *Focus*

MUSIC × MUSEUMS

Richard Bratby looks in on a series of concerts filmed at London venues

Oliver Zeffman and the Philharmonia Orchestra perform live at the Cutty Sark in Greenwich

Filming any concert is an uneasy compromise. We can all list the visual clichés: the slow tour of the hall's architectural features, the gradual fade on to a gleaming horn, or a conductor caught in profile, looking rapt against a darkened background. Anything more than that only complicates matters. Whether it's stock imagery of nature or paintings, or the full-blown kitsch of a Viennese New Year ballet interlude, the basic problem remains the same: it's a distraction. The eyes bully the ears: as soon as you add pictures, the concentration is repeatedly, determinedly tugged away from the music. The art that is supposed to be at the centre of the whole experience is reduced to a soundtrack.

These four films (available to stream on Apple Music and **viking.tv** and also available as audio-only recordings) attempt to find a middle path and the starting point, in each case, is an attractive one – a series of concerts, conducted by the young British conductor Oliver Zeffman in 2022 in some of London's more photogenic (and acoustically tolerable) museums, and blending (in the words of the blurb) 'classical music with the capital's most impressive architecture and works of art'. They're described, needless to say, as 'immersive', which will doubtless have been the case for the live audiences on each occasion. It's less consistently applicable to the filmed performances. You're invited to focus, at different points, on the music or the visuals, and in fairness it's testament to the producers' seriousness that – surrounded by such enticing visual distractions – they tend, by and large, to land on the side of the music.

In each case, though, there's a thematic connection between music and venue. So a programme of Beethoven's Sixth Symphony and *Choral Fantasy* in the **British Library**, with the Academy of St Martin in the Fields and Peter Donohoe as piano soloist, is inspired (we're told) by an exhibition that included the original manuscripts of both works. We don't get to see them, though. The orchestra plays in the library's main atrium, with the singers stacked on the surrounding staircases. The colours of RB Kitaj's huge tapestry are glimpsed behind the orchestra, glowing through the enveloping gloom, but we never really see it in full.

All to the good, you might say; equally (you might think) why bother? The director is overwhelmingly concerned with Zeffman, Donohoe and the orchestra, and the darkened surroundings are reminiscent of Karajan's famous Berlin films. The film frequently cuts to wobbly handheld close-up shots which dive in among the orchestra, focusing briefly on a player's ear or chin but generally creating an air of jumpiness and instability which, like the overall darkness, feels curiously at odds with the open-air freshness of Beethoven's music in Zeffman's boisterous, upfront reading.

Not all the films take the same approach, though the wobbly-cam operator is just as hyperactive in a programme of Handel, Lully, Cavalli, Caroline Shaw and Stravinsky from the Raphael Court of the **V&A**, and again in a concert of Benjamin, Birtwistle, Terry Riley and others in the **Science Museum**. The latter concert is filmed in black-and-white, adding an additional layer of arthouse chilliness, though the cameraman is occasionally tempted to linger on gleaming machines and suspended aircraft. We glimpse individuals – audience or orchestra? It's not entirely clear – wandering moodily about the space exploration gallery.

At the V&A the director can't resist drifting over the Raphaels. Altogether more bizarre are the brief shots of the countertenor Jakub Józef Orliński striking anguished poses in a deserted gallery. The concert was inspired, apparently, by the V&A's menswear exhibition *Fashioning Masculinities* but Orliński's plangent, effortlessly fluid singing makes quite enough of a statement in its own right. Orliński is one of the musical highlights of this series; there's a poise and a controlled passion to his Handel and Cavalli arias that play nicely off Zeffman's sculptural, clean-lined performance of Stravinsky's *Apollo*, and an account of Caroline Shaw's now-ubiquitous *Entr'acte* that manages to squeeze real emotion from the gaps that open up between Shaw's slightly self-conscious post-minimalist gestures.

The orchestra, as at the British Library, is the ASMF, and of their two programmes I'd say that the V&A one has the edge. Both have a boomy, church-like acoustic, but it works to the advantage of the Baroque and Stravinsky scores, offsetting the litheness of the orchestral textures. The Beethoven programme at the British Library is not without its pleasures. As mentioned, there's a real ebullience and sense of forward momentum to Zeffman's *Pastoral*; a muscular, 'big band' modern-instrument reading with some terrifically characterful bassoon- and timpani-playing. And Beethoven from Peter Donohoe – that most undervalued of British keyboard lions – is always welcome. There's an imposing sense of authority in his opening, quasi-improvisatory solo.

But quite apart from the distracting camerawork, the dynamic range of both performances is somewhat limited, and

there's little sense of *piano* in the 'Scene by the Brook'. Possibly the acoustic made that inevitable; certainly, there's an emphatic quality to these performances that can feel slightly relentless. The concert at the Science Museum, however, delivers some genuinely satisfying performances, whatever your thoughts on the visual dimension. A Bach transcription by George Benjamin establishes a mood of headlong, risk-taking energy: bounding and surging with a slightly rough-cut vigour that evolves – in Birtwistle's *Tragoedia* – into playing that's simultaneously immediate and intensely refined.

Again, Zeffman finds emotion even in the silences. They're positively pregnant and the whole performance has a tension that in no way obscures the sensitivity with which the players – the group here is the Ozero Ensemble – gauge the shades and subtleties of Birtwistle's inner voices. The concert concludes with a 35-minute sprint through Terry Riley's *In C*, and you sense (as often with this work) that as a live occasion it must have been a lot of fun. As it is, it's a lively and wholly engaging burst of sonic primary colour at the end of the black-and-white film.

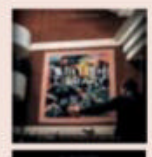
But I've been saving the best for last, although – interrogating my conscience – it's possible that one reason why 'Live at the **Cutty Sark**' felt so satisfying is that here, at last, there was a glimpse of daylight. Literally: since its recent restoration, the famous tea clipper now sits atop a curved glass 'sea', and Zeffman and the Philharmonia Orchestra perform on the floor of the dry dock, with the glass roof enclosing the huge, copper-plated keel of the ship high above their heads. Light streams in; a welcome release after the enclosed, sepulchral atmosphere of the previous films, and the cameramen respond as if liberated, soaring up into the ship's rigging and showing exterior shots and even archive footage. Despite myself, I was touched to see brief black-and-white clips of the old ship entering dock for the last time, counterpointed against the yearning lines of 'Calm Sea in Summer', the last of Grace Williams's *Sea Sketches*.

Still, there's that old problem once again – the visual element pulling focus from the music. In truth, I have to admit that as a combined audiovisual experience this was the most enjoyable of the lot. Some things rankled: when the film's titles roll over the first bars of Vaughan Williams's *Tallis Fantasia*, one of the sublimest openings in British music is reduced to a theme tune, breaking up the overall experience of Zeffman's interpretation (which, if it failed to probe as deep as some readings, was nonetheless lyrical, luminous and sensitively phrased). Decide for yourself whether it's particularly apposite to watch a Thames waterbus pulling away from its jetty just as Vaughan Williams's spatially separated second orchestra (it didn't look very far away, but the sound was magically remote) whispers its distant response.

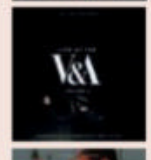
Overall, though, music carries the day at the *Cutty Sark*. The rest of the programme is (of course) sea-themed, and while any new recording of Grace Williams's glorious *Sea Sketches* is to be treasured, Zeffman's is by any metric one of the finest I've heard: brisk and atmospheric in the opening 'High Wind' and making full use of the (again, distinctly spacious) acoustic in the slower movements. The strings of the Philharmonia develop an almost Mahlerian richness and intensity in the luscious 'Sailing Song', and find a Britten-like rawness and grandeur in the eerie mistscapes of the third movement, 'Channel Sirens'.

But the highlight of the programme – and the series – comes just before that, when Sarah Connolly sings Elgar's *Sea Pictures*. Connolly easily assumes the mantle of Janet Baker before her, finding meaning and colour in each word (every syllable is perfectly clear, even without subtitles). Zeffman draws wondrously dark and delicate hues from the Philharmonia's wind and percussion sections and Connolly soars nobly above – that shaded, effortlessly expressive mezzo sounding more heartfelt and eloquent than ever. The ending of 'Sabbath Morning at Sea' is positively exalted. At moments like this the question of ear versus eye – like head versus heart – ceases to matter. It's all one, and it's very fine indeed. G

THE RECORDINGS



Live at the British Library
Donohoe; Bach Ch; ASMF / Zeffman
Platoon PLAT17474



Live at the V&A, Vol 2
Orliński; ASMF / Zeffman
Platoon PLAT17187

Live at the Science Museum
Ozero Ens / Zeffman
Platoon PLAT17473

Live at the Cutty Sark
Connolly; Philh Orch / Zeffman
Platoon PLAT17563

PHOTOGRAPHY: MATTHEW JOHNSON

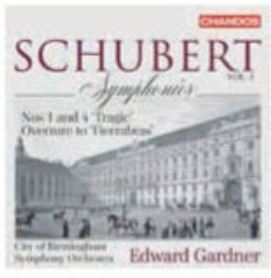
Valda Wilson on Capriccio, while Matthias Goerne delivers a similarly warm and perceptive account of the Five Songs. Incidentally, this is the first recording of this song-cycle sung by a baritone, previous recordings having used Schreker's alternative option of a female vocalist.

The *Nachtstück* from Schreker's second opera *Der ferne Klang* represents the composer's music at its richest and most intoxicating. It draws from Eschenbach a performance that's sumptuous and impassioned but also a touch ponderous. Vassily Sinaisky's recording of the work for Chandos is only marginally faster but I feel captures the music's ebb and flow far more persuasively. By contrast, Eschenbach's interpretation of the *Kleine Suite* is an unqualified success, surpassing even the recording made by the composer with the Berlin Philharmonic in 1932. With recorded sound of splendid presence and definition, this is altogether a most recommendable release. **Christian Hoskins**

Nachtstück, Fünf Gesänge – selected comparison:
BBC PO, Sinaisky *Chandos CHAN9797 (6/00)*
Vom ewigen Leben – selected comparison:
Wilson, Deutsche Staatsphilh Rheinland-Pfalz, Ward *Capriccio C5348 (2/19)*
Kleine Suite – selected comparison:
BPO, Schreker *Symposium 1271/3 (8/05)*

Schubert

'Symphonies, Vol 3'
Symphonies – No 1, D82; No 4, 'Tragic', D417. Fierrabras – Overture
City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra / Edward Gardner
Chandos (CHSA5265 • 68')



Edward Gardner approaches the end of his Schubert cycle – only the Ninth to go – with a coupling of the First and Fourth. As in previous instalments (3/19, 5/20), he keeps the music light on its feet without resorting to the provocative extremes of tempo favoured by René Jacobs (with B'Rock). Thus the *Andante* of the First is kept moving, a sense of expectancy in place of repose, and the one-in-the-bar Menuetto has a real rustic stamp to it. The finale is suavely humorous rather than self-consciously quirky.

In the *Tragic* Fourth we hear Schubert finally becoming Schubert, his harmonic palette expanding and his delight in exploiting it fully audible. Gardner's care for architecture keeps the *Allegro vivace* on its toes and prevents the movement's catchphrase – the sudden drop of a major third to reprise material – from becoming repetitious. The finale fizzes with barely suppressed fury. The Weber-ish *Fierrabras* Overture (also Holliger's coupling for the First Symphony) provides an atmospheric encore.

Again, Chandos provides almost cinematic sound. One can't help feeling, though, that Heinz Holliger's Basel recordings of this repertoire score for the greater insistency of the Swiss woodwind – hardly surprising under the eye and ear of one of the last century's foremost oboists. Holliger's laser-like analytic focus doesn't preclude the affection for this music that you also feel in the playing of the Birmingham band. Perhaps Gardner's 'Great' C major, hopefully due imminently from these quarters, will settle the matter of which is the more desirable of these two recent cycles. **David Threasher**

Symphonies – selected comparisons:
B'Rock Orch, Jacobs
Pentatone PTC5186 707/856 (2/19, 10/21 – oas)
Basel CO, Holliger
Sony Classical 19075 81440/41-2 (7/19 – aas)

Surinach

Acrobats of God. Embattled Garden. The Owl and the Pussycat[a]
[a]**Aliana de la Guardia** *narr*
Boston Modern Orchestra Project / Gil Rose
BMOP/sound (1089 • 61' • T)

Gil Rose has a special knack for finding music that has somehow slipped through the cracks. Here, he gives us three ballet scores composed for Martha Graham and her company by Carlos Surinach (1915-97). Born in Barcelona and trained in Germany (including seminars with Richard Strauss), Surinach settled in 1950 in the United States, where his flamenco-inflected style appealed to leading choreographers.

Embattled Garden (1957), a riff on the story of Adam and Eve, was his first collaboration with Graham. Surinach said that he wanted to bring some of flamenco's 'raw energy' to his concert music, and this is apparent throughout his score. There's an obsessive element, too – often conveyed by repeated ideas and phrases – that helps to create an atmosphere of erotic infatuation. There's plenty of colour and energy, although for me the highlight is the quietly ecstatic 'Tiento de Pena' section.

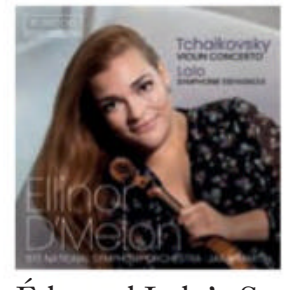
The title *Acrobats of God* (1960) is a play on the medieval notion that monks were 'athletes of God' due to their dedication to precise rituals. Graham wrote: 'I believe that we learn by practice. Whether it means to learn to dance by practising living, the principles are the same.' She described this ballet as 'a light-hearted celebration of the art of dance and the discipline of the dancer's world'. Musically, it's delightful and definitely worthy of rediscovery. Despite the clear echoes of Falla, Stravinsky and Prokofiev (as well as a faint reminiscence of *Carmen*'s 'Gypsy Song' in the opening Fanfare), Surinach's own voice shines through. There are some ingenious touches, too, such as the faint, hovering cloud created by the xylophone in the Interlude of scene 4.

The Owl and the Pussycat (1978), a setting of Edward Lear's famous poem, projects a sense of childlike playfulness and wonder – or, rather, a sense of the childlike as seen through the melancholy eyes of an adult. The poem is narrated in segments that divide the score into scenes. Cuban-American soprano Alina de la Guardia, who narrates, has a slight Spanish accent that I find a charming match for the slight Spanish accent of Surinach's score.

The Boston Modern Orchestra Project play all three scores with panache, the recorded sound is well balanced and the booklet includes an illuminating note by Clifton Ingram as well as excerpts from a 1979 Surinach interview about the collaborations. **Andrew Farach-Colton**

Tchaikovsky · Lalo

Lalo Symphonie espagnole, Op 21
Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto, Op 35
Ellinor D'Melon *vn*
RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra / Jaime Martín
Rubicon (RCD1106 • 72')



Tchaikovsky was inspired to write his Violin Concerto after playing through Édouard Lalo's *Symphonie espagnole* with Yosif Kotek in March 1878, when the composer was recuperating by the shores of Lake Geneva. Ellinor D'Melon plays both works on her debut disc, recorded either side of the pandemic in Dublin's National Concert Hall. Born in Jamaica to Cuban parents, D'Melon's career has largely been in Spain and here she performs with Spanish conductor Jaime Martín, alongside the RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra.

D'Melon has a fine, clean tone and there's much to like about her Tchaikovsky, particularly the buoyant finale, which is light on its toes. The first movement is a little leisurely – and fussy around the cadenza – but the Canzonetta

Sumptuous and impassioned: Christoph Eschenbach leads atmospheric accounts of Franz Schreker's orchestral works – see review on page 47

is delicately spun and nostalgic. Martín and the NSO don't offer the most characterful or poetic support but they are attentive. Nothing here to displace the primary recommendation (Daniel Lozakovich – DG, 3/20) in my Collection survey (1/23).

Lalo's *Symphonie espagnole* comes off very well, though. It's a piece bursting with good tunes and Spanish sunshine but doesn't appear nearly enough on concert programmes. Martín and the NSO are bullish in the opening *tutti* of the *Allegro non troppo* and D'Melon digs into the opening theme with relish. There's a nice energy to the Scherzando and a smoky seductiveness to the Intermezzo. The Rondo finale doesn't quite throw caution to the wind but it's tidily played nonetheless. With attractively engineered sound and a fine booklet note by Andrew Stewart, there's much to enjoy here. **Mark Pullinger**

'Atmospheriques, Vol 1'

Bjarnason From Space I Saw Earth[a] **Gísladóttir** ÓS **Mazzoli** Sinfonia (for Orbiting Spheres) **Sigfúsdóttir** Clockworking for Orchestra **Thorvaldsdottir** CATAMORPHOSIS
Iceland Symphony Orchestra / Daníel Bjarnason with [a]**Eva Ollikainen, [a]Kornilios Michailidis** *conds* [a]**Members of ISO Youth Orchestra, LHÍ; [a]The Bell Choir of Reykjanesbær Music School**
Sono Luminus (DSL92267 • CD + Blu-ray Disc • 59')

All but one of the works on this new album date from the past 10 years, not that you would know that from Sono Luminus's documentation. Not even the dates of composition are provided, so let me fill in these and other gaps. Missy Mazzoli's *Sinfonia (for Orbiting Spheres)* is the oldest, written for the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra in 2014 and rescored for larger forces two years later. Bára Gísladóttir's *ÓS* (the title can mean 'mouth' or 'estuary') was composed in 2018 to mark the centenary of Iceland's independence, with Daníel Bjarnason's *From Space I Saw Earth* composed a year later. Maria Sigfúsdóttir's *Clockworking for Orchestra* (so titled, I presume, to distinguish it from her earlier, similarly titled work for Baroque string trio and harpsichord) and Anna Thorvaldsdottir's *CATAMORPHOSIS* (named after the process of evolutionary change; the upper case is intentional) were both composed in 2020.

Prospective buyers may also be intrigued to know that Daníel Bjarnason's *From Space I Saw Earth* does not 'improbably stretch … perspective from earth to the moon and back' but is one of several works inspired by the *Apollo 11* mission. Bjarnason composed it for three separate orchestral groups, each with its own conductor (at the premiere Gustavo Dudamel, Esa-Pekka Salonen and Zubin Mehta, no less!), and closes with musicians walking through the auditorium playing crotales. It is a magical touch, and should have been worth a mention, even in the marketing blurb that passes inadequately for a booklet note.

Fortunately, the performances by the Iceland Symphony Orchestra (their extras, buried in small print on page 15 of the booklet, are listed above in their rightful place) are on a much higher level of attainment. The range of sonorities they bring out in Gísladóttir's *ÓS* is viscerally gripping – rushing strings, apocalyptically deep wind notes and percussion fusillades (reminding me a touch of Marie Samuelsson's *Air Drum III*) – and Mazzoli's engaging *Sinfonia* and Sigfúsdóttir's *Clockworking* provide textural, stylistic and expressive contrast. Sono Luminus's sound is top-notch. Enjoy! **Guy Rickards**

PHOTOGRAPHY: MARCO BORGGREVE

Bach's Keyboard Concerto BWV1052

Steven Devine puts a unique spin on Bach's compositional choices, finds **Mark Seow**

Steven Devine: recording Bach with the OAE sees him bring us closer to the composer as a family man

That Steven Devine has found the time to sit down with me for this interview is lucky. The evening before last he was playing Bach in a pub in Victoria, Canada, teaching punters to sing a quodlibet. Tomorrow he's off to Malta's Valletta Baroque Festival to direct Handel's cantata *Aci, Galatea e Polifemo* (1708) – a 'much more dramatic, much more interesting' Italian version of the story than the English pastoral masque from 1718, he tells me. Today is no less jam-packed. He's just come from Acland Burghley School – the north London secondary school that the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, of which he is Principal Keyboard, has so lovingly made its home. Having sat down just seconds ago, he launches in with full verve: 'When you're a kid, when you're 15 and trying to play the entire works of Bach because you're suddenly fired up by enthusiasm and you come across this, you just have no idea how to play it.' Devine first learnt the Keyboard Concerto in D minor, BWV1052 (which is one of several he's recorded for Resonus with the OAE), as a student at Chetham's School of Music. Aged 14, he shifted 'sideways' from piano to harpsichord and organ (he lists them among his other teenage discoveries, 'football and girls, that sort of thing'). In all, then, he seems to be a very normal human being. So when he brings out his score, a pristine Bärenreiter edition published in 1999, I struggle to hide my horror: there's not a single stroke of graphite. Sirens go off in my head. Is Devine really one of those people for whom to mark the music of Bach with a single annotation is to commit blasphemy?

'It's beautifully clean because I don't play from it,' he tells me. 'I use it for reference.' As performing from memory is not a hallmark of the historical performance community, I probe further, and eventually Devine comes out with what he presents as a dirty secret. 'This is so nerdy: I make my own editions of everything.' He describes an arduous process: 'I play it into Sibelius software from my keyboard and then revise it over and over.' One of Devine's obsessions is beaming. 'I think Bach tells us a lot by the way he beams,' he muses. I adore this conception of beaming being not merely a neutral or administrative way of organising music on the page, but rather a way in which a composer inscribes an expressive approach towards performing that music. It wholly resonates with Devine's character, too, in which fastidiousness is always geared towards gestural ends. He then gives me what is perhaps the real reason for leaving his self-made edition at home: 'It's unreadable.'

Bach's writing, of course, contributes to the notational saturation of the page. 'It's very dense writing, it's very complex writing, and it's very technically challenging. There are very few compositions, including Bach's own solo works, that have such contrary motion and such close work in the hands. If you think about the Preludes and Fugues, they don't have that density of work. This is the only piece where you really have to sit down and take it apart, hands separately, just to make sure you've got both things going on at the right time.' Devine's language frequently ventures into the flamboyant, but this he puts plainly: 'You don't expect to have to do that very often as a harpsichordist. I've never ever played anything like that in another harpsichord piece, ever.'

We discuss the nuts and bolts of Bach's writing. The syncopation that comes 'so early in the piece, so brazenly, so absolutely without warning in all the parts', and the unison writing – a kind of 'textural leitmotif' – which in the second

movement is 'very peculiar'. Devine stresses that these kinds of features weren't being explored by anybody else in Bach's time. But as soon as we latch on to a musical aspect of the score, Devine's mind races to that *not* notated in ink. Indeed, for the purposes of this feature, it's remarkable how much time we spend talking about stuff not of the score, but rather of 'the hall' – the now-classic binary, as formulated by musicologist Nicholas Cook, of music on 'the page' and of 'the stage'. For Devine, the unison opening is a 'call to attention' to those in Zimmermann's coffee house in Leipzig – where he speculates the concerto was first performed. 'If there's a bit of chatter and a bit of coffee cup rattling going on, it's almost fanfare-like.'

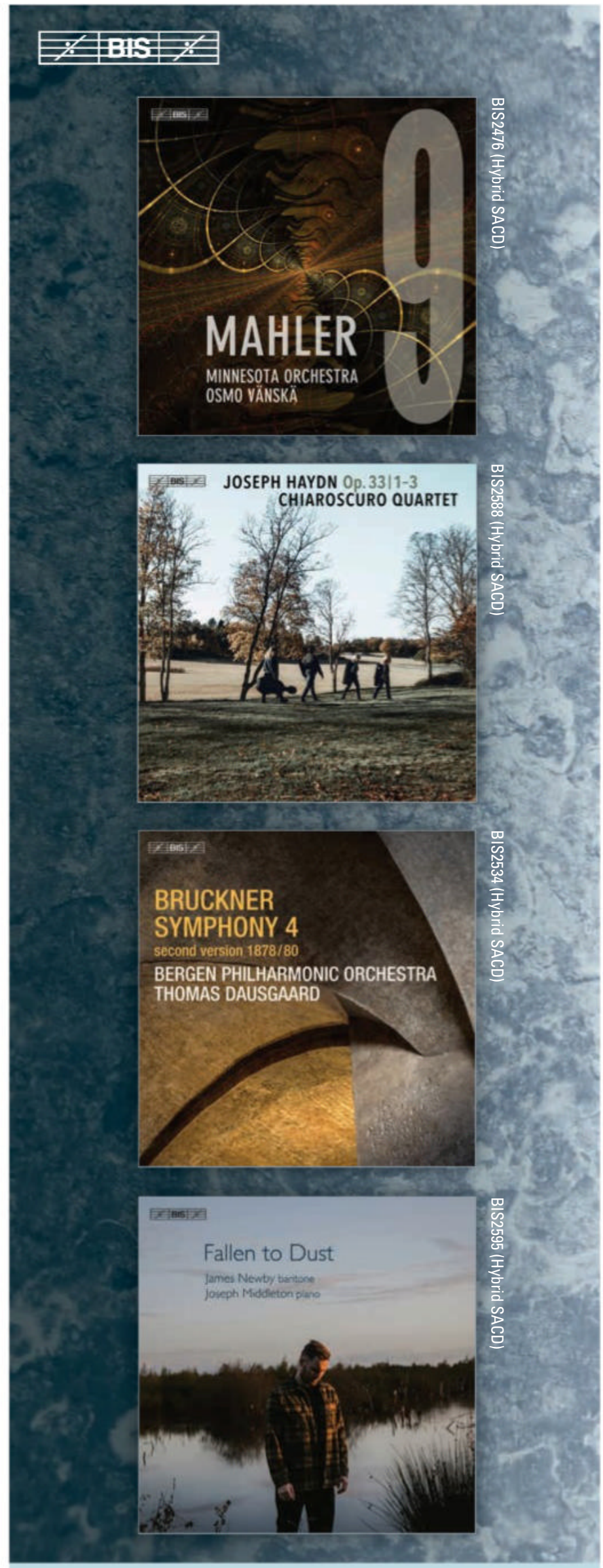
'There's nothing else like it round then, nothing on this virtuosic scale, and there are naughty elements in all the concertos'

Devine is perhaps most excited by why the concerto is the way that it is. That there is 'nothing like it round then, nothing on this virtuosic scale' doesn't for Devine conjure an unapproachable composer-deity, but rather is something that can help us get closer to the man. It's odd, transgressive; and 'devious' features – 'There are sort of naughty elements in all of the keyboard concertos' – sketch a portrait of Bach as a wholesome family man. Pointing to bar 27 of the first movement, he asks, 'Where did that come from? There must have been some fizzy stuff going round. I wonder if he's sort of doing something that his sons were talking about over breakfast? And the syncopation, in this concerto and in the other in D minor too [BWV1059]: I wonder if there's something there that the kids were doing, something that they were talking about.' Devine imagines that keeping up with his children shaped Bach's extreme octave writing, too. 'I can't help feeling – and I have no basis for this whatsoever – that maybe it was something Carl Philipp Emanuel or Wilhelm Friedemann did when they played. Perhaps they loved to sort of "funk" around like this, and he's giving them something they did – we don't find it in anything that Bach does.'

'It's nuts!' says Devine of the passages of extreme virtuosity in the first movement. He then imagines Bach playing the role of pushy parent. 'Is he trying to show off? Is he making his son work harder?' The Bach in Devine's mind is a gloriously rounded human being, a family man with 'always a twinkle in the eye'. And yet, Devine never downplays the extraordinary elements of Bach's composition. At multiple points in the interview, he tries to show just how extraordinary the concerto is by breaking away from the score and attempting to play what other, 'lesser' composers might have done. Each time, he fails: Devine's fingers stumble to find a more boring version, one that irons out Bach's extreme syncopation or rich orchestration. It's a telling sign, as Devine knows this concerto inside out, and his fingers simply won't cooperate. Moreover, he adores it for its very complexity. Perhaps it's also why he cherishes concerts that experiment with less traditional spatial formats, such as with audience members who are so close they can 'turn the violinist's page' as well as 'smell the fear'. While I doubt Devine would let an audience member place their coffee cup on his precious harpsichord, there's something of the bustling air of Zimmermann's cafe in the way he turns the unmarked pages of his Bärenreiter score. G

Devine's Bach concertos on Resonus will be reviewed in a future issue

PHOTOGRAPHY: NICK RUTTER



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Chamber

Liam Cagney hails a definitive account of Ligeti's string quartets:
'Quatuor Diotima face Ligeti's nocturnal phantasmagoria head-on, rendering it in all its hard-won beauty' ▶ REVIEW ON PAGE 59

Richard Whitehouse enjoys an American programme for winds:
'An impressive demonstration of Calefax's sympathies across repertoire this ensemble has made its own' ▶ REVIEW ON PAGE 6-

Auerbach

24 Preludes

Christine Bernsted *vn* **Ramez Mhaanna** *pf*

Naxos (8 574464 • 54')

The Soviet-born Austrian-American novelist, poet, composer, conductor and concert pianist Lera Auerbach's 24 Preludes for violin and piano were completed in 1999 and dedicated to violinist Vadim Gluzman and pianist Angela Yoffe, who went on to record them for BIS (the first commercial CD of her music, 1/04). As Andrew Mellor says in his excellent booklet note: 'The score follows the key scheme established by Chopin's 24 Preludes for piano, beginning in C major and descending through a circle of fifths via which each major key is followed by its relative minor, thus covering the entire tonal spectrum.' In his review of the BIS disc Duncan Druce pointed out that 'sometimes the key is only tenuously suggested (F sharp major); sometimes we're halfway through the piece before it's established (C major). On other occasions the tonal centre may be clear but the mode less so (B major). Or we come across naive, straightforward tonal material, subverted by unusual timbre or an "alien" harmonic context (G major).'

Auerbach herself suggests that the tonal order of the pieces is vital to understanding them, though whether you need to be conscious of evolving tonality rather than to side-glances that take in what sound like echoes of Bach (No 22), Vivaldi (No 24, at least initially), Mozart (K488, No 8), Prokofiev ('Dance with Mandolins', No 9), Bartók (No 14), Shostakovich (Nos 11 and 16), possible references to her Jewish forebears (No 19) and Chopin himself (Nos 12 and 20) is a moot point. Take note, yes, but then forget everything I or anyone else has said or written before you settle down to listen.

The vital quality, especially with reference to Chopin, is the way the Preludes oscillate between moods – extrovert assertion, quiet confession, anger, nobility and a certain brighter strain of humour. I'd strongly advise against dipping in; you need to swallow the set whole to appreciate its considerable scope and wider meaning. And there are the contrasts, from the retreating desolation of No 16 to the whirling dervishes that gatecrash the cycle with No 17. Chopin again, not in style but in the alternation of sublimity and violence. This is altogether remarkable music.

But whose version to choose? A difficult one that. Christine Bernsted and Ramez Mhaanna are more forwardly balanced than Gluzman and Yoffe. I'd say that there isn't too much to choose between Mhaanna and Yoffe but of the two violinists, Gluzman has the marginally sweeter tone, though Danish-born (and trained) Bernsted certainly has the measure of Auerbach's inspirational flight. As for overall impact, it's even-stevens, though not in terms of price, where Naxos will save you money whether you opt for digital or physical product, so I suppose if you're working on a budget and want to investigate, the choice is easy. **Rob Cowan**

CPE Bach · JC Bach

'Virtuosity and Grace'

CPE Bach Sonatas for Viola da gamba and Basso continuo – Wq88 H510; Wq136 H558[a]; Wq137 H559[b] **JC Bach** Sonatas for Viola da gamba and Keyboard – W B2*b*[c]; W B4*b*; W B6*b*; W B15*b*

L'Amoroso (Guido Balestracci, [ab]Stéphanie Houillon *vas da gamba* Paolo Corsi *fp*/[bc]*hpd*)

Arcana (A543 • 77')

Surely this is the first recording devoted solely to the works for viola da gamba and keyboard by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714-88) and his younger brother Johann Christian (1735-82)? If so, it is inspired, a delightful footnote to an imagined account of the viola da gamba's drawn-out demise, akin to one of the numerous attenuated appoggiaturas found throughout this wonderful music.

Of the more logical pairing, the music of JC Bach – the so-called London Bach – and that of his great friend and colleague the gamba virtuoso Carl Friedrich Abel (1723-87), there are many excellent examples. But here we have an opportunity not only to contemplate the relationship between virtuoso and composer – CPE Bach's Abel was the brilliant gambist Ludwig Christian Hesse – but between father, son and sibling. JS Bach's influence on both; the elder's on the younger; the stylistic differences among the music: all variously emerge and recede among musico-rhetorical tropes, suave melodic invention, flashing figurations and subtle counterpoint.

Guido Balestracci plays two sonorous, pungent seven-string gambas, copies of 17th- and 18th-century models, while Paolo Corsi performs on two bright square pianos – a Broadwood and an anonymous Italian model from *c*1795 – and a Rubio harpsichord after Pascal Taskin (1769). The keyboard is subordinate in CPE Bach's sonatas but an equal partner in JC Bach's. This is fortuitous, as we are able better to savour Corsi's elegant, characterful performances and the respective timbres of his instruments. Nevertheless, it is Balestracci's extraordinary playing that takes centre stage: often wistful, often wild, always compelling. **William Yeoman**

JS Bach

Violin Sonatas – BWV1014; BWV1015; BWV1016; BWV1017; BWV1018; BWV1019 (including alternative movements); BWV1021; BWV1023

Adrian Butterfield *vn* **Silas Wollston** *hpd*

Somm (SOMMCD0664-2 ② • 123')

Harpsichordist Silas Wollston opens the Sonata in B minor, BWV1014, with particular evocation (a make or break moment, really, when there are so many

Christine Bernsted and Ramez Mhaanna explore the 24 Preludes by Lera Auerbach, music of diverse moods: assertion, confession, anger, nobility and humour

PHOTOGRAPHY: TOM MCKENZIE

already fine albums of Bach's sonatas for violin and harpsichord available). Wollston plays with breath and mystery, and that most magical thing – when rubato and articulation combine as a single utterance – is effortlessly traced by his fingertips. The spell isn't broken on violinist Adrian Butterfield's entrance either, which, beautifully balanced in vulnerability, is a song spinning with life. Only occasionally does the double-stopping get in the way of the flow, but perhaps this colours the sound world of frailty all the more seductively.

We don't have to wait long for some equally fine playing: the third movement, an *Andante*, is powdered in childlike sensibility. The tempo is well controlled, and this whiff of motion that plays out in the *Andante un poco* from the Sonata in A, BWV1015, is another highlight. Wollston's articulation here is distractingly wonderful: nuanced and abundant in detail but never finicky. It's an excellent contrast to the primary colours of the sonata's closing *Presto*. Butterfield's panache is interestingly tempered: again, there's something wonderfully childlike in this interpretation, outlined with a feisty edge that never strays into bolshiness.

I appreciate the inclusion of Bach's abandoned movements for BWV1019. But the *Cantabile*, *ma un poco adagio* is far too chirpy for my liking. Surely some notches slower would allow this melody to sing as it so expressly desires. This speedy version comes in at 5'20", and I'm not sure what the hurry is: Podger/Pinnock (6'02" – Channel Classics, 2/01) and Manze/Egarr (7'23" – Harmonia Mundi, 3/00) would seem to agree with me.

Mark Seow

Gassmann

Oboe Quartets (Divertimentos)[a] – H482; H483; H486. Oboe Quintets[a] – H571; H573. Cassatio, H532[b]

Lajos Lencsés [a]*ob*/[b]*cor ang* [b]**Lena Gersbacher** *cor ang* [b]**Josef Weissteiner,** [b]**Wolfgang Wipfler** *hns* [b]**Libor Šíma** *bn* [a]**Szigeti Quartet**

CPO (CPO555 528-2 • 67')

Gyrowetz

Three Flute Quartets, Op 37

Ardinghello Ensemble

CPO (CPO555 435-2 • 59')

''Twas on a Monday morning the gasman came to call', sang Flanders & Swann. Many years ago, I chose Florian Leopold Gassmann as the subject of postgraduate study, and it would be a lie to deny that the poor chap's name was a considerable part of the attraction. As it turned out, he was a composer of no mean talent and individuality. Born in 1729 in Bohemia, he studied with Padre Martini and scored sufficient operatic success to be called to Vienna, where he rose to the position of *Hofkapellmeister*. Alongside opera, he was active in the major instrumental forms and composed a small amount of sacred music including a Requiem (1774) that continued to be performed for major Austrian funerals into the 1780s and beyond, and evidently influenced Mozart. When Gassmann died in 1774, following a fall from a carriage, his imperial post was inherited by his pupil, Antonio Salieri.

A pair of oboe quintets draw their material from his Gluck-influenced opera *Amore e Psiche* (1767), their sound world Italianate and lyrical, interesting enough harmonically and melodically to avoid outstaying their welcome. A set of three oboe quartets is not dissimilar, sharing the material more equitably among the players (especially the hyperactive viola) in a

manner that is inescapably reminiscent of Mozart's F major work for the same forces, K370 (?1781/84). The central *Allegro assai* of the E flat Quartet (H482) is particularly engaging and perky, the *Moderato* finale of the B flat (H483) an adventurous set of variations. Lajos Lencsés – 78 at the time of this recording – retains the liquid tone and technical mastery I admired in his 2006 Vaughan Williams Oboe Concerto (see page 100), and his colleagues are with him all the way. The closing *Cassatio* for horns (two English, two French) and bassoon is a pneumatic treat.

Adalbert Gyrowetz, also Bohemian, was a generation younger and more widely travelled than Gassmann, although he too eventually settled in Vienna. Extended sojourns in Italy, France and London (where he sat out the French Revolution and met Haydn) are said to have given his music a cosmopolitan outlook, although his Op 37 Flute Quartets (1799) cleave by and large to the *buffo* style of the preceding decades. All three works follow the standard fast-slow-fast format, with an expansive sonata-allegro, a sustained aria-like central movement (a set of variations in the third quartet in D) and a lighter-hearted finale. The Ardinghello Ensemble, on period instruments, provide enthusiastic advocacy for these finely wrought if unchallenging works, even if their performances don't quite match the unassailable authority of Lencsés and the Szigeti Quartet in Gassmann. **David Threasher**

Grime · Newland · Turnage

'Bracing Change 2'

Grime String Quartet No 2[a] **Newland** difference is everywhere (altered)[b] **Turnage** Contusion[c]

[b]**Bozzini Quartet;** [a]**Heath Quartet;** [c]**Piatti Quartet**

NMC (NMCD242 • 45')

Three string quartets by three composers performed by three different groups. In this sense, 'Bracing Change 2' is no different to the first instalment (8/17). However, in keeping with the spirit of the project and its title, we are presented again with three works that in very different ways offer alternative creative solutions to the challenge of writing contemporary quartet music.

First up is Mark-Anthony Turnage's hard-hitting *Contusion*. Composed in 2013, this terse one-movement work, which takes its title from a Sylvia Plath poem, opens with a hesitantly pleading two-note gesture. This figure undergoes a series of tense and twisting transformations with each set of shifting statements, as if preyed upon like a festering wound. The music eventually ruptures some two minutes before the end, giving way to a plaintive cello melody that possesses a keening quality, before the darkness descends once more. The Piatti Quartet, who received the Sidney Griller Award for their performance of Turnage's work at the 2015 Wigmore Hall International String Quartet Competition, offer a highly sensitised and nuanced reading.

As its title suggests, a series of slowly unfolding sustained chords in Paul Newland's *difference is everywhere (altered)* plays on the paradox between similarity, difference and silence. The effect, as noted by Steph Power in a brilliant set of booklet notes, is to focus the listener on 'tiny nuances of difference' and 'the sense of a shared time and space becoming physically palpable' in the music. On the surface, the music's sound world suggests Morton Feldman or perhaps late Cage, although Newland's influences also extend further to the East.

In many ways, the highlight of the disc is Helen Grime's String Quartet No 2. A powerful, compelling and absorbing work played with a combination of grit and polish by the Heath Quartet, Grime's Second Quartet starts with a shimmering two-note undulating figure nested between viola and cello. The music then bursts into action with a more statement-like two-note theme that evokes Tippett in its rhythmic purposefulness, projection and drive. An energetic second movement draws on more hocket-like, imitative exchanges that often extend into the quartet's higher registers, while a calmer, reflective third movement contrasts low muted textures with an animated middle section that spirals downwards by step, before shuddering to a stop with a series of faltering heartbeats. Powerful stuff. **Pwyll ap Siôn**

Haydn

String Quartets – Op 42; Op 77. The Seven Last Words of Our Saviour on the Cross, Op 51

The London Haydn Quartet

Hyperion (CDA68410 ② • 146')

The London Haydn Quartet reaches the end of its period-instrument Hyperion Haydn cycle: well, almost – they still have to release Opp 1 and 2. For now, though, if this is an end, no one who loves this glorious music could have hoped for a better finish. There's something so fresh and so bold about the two quartets of Op 77 that it's hard to believe they're the last words of an ailing composer. They really do feel more like the work of a genius who (as Dr Burney said of Op 76) 'had expended none of his fire before'.

That fire burns powerfully and cleanly in these performances. As throughout this series, the recorded sound (the venue is Potton Hall) is transparent but resonant, with a certain boominess around the cello adding to the sensation that we're hearing a public performance in a sizeable hall, rather than anything more domestic. At this stage in Haydn's trajectory, of course, that's a valid approach, and once again, the more I returned to these performances, the more I found myself warming to their fantasy, their disciplined spontaneity and their cumulative insights.

So while it's difficult to capture the full playfulness of (say) the march-like opening movement of Op 77 No 1 in an acoustic as spacious as this, the performances gain in depth of tone and dynamic range, allowing the group to pull and stretch phrases at the end of the movement in a way that accentuates the full grandeur of Haydn's vision. Similarly, in the middle of the first movement of Op 77 No 2, where Haydn's harmonies suddenly darken and intensify and vast, Romantic shadows fall across the music, it really helps to have that added richness and resonance in the bottom register. Haydn on a cosmic scale: well, why on earth not?

And yet none of it sounds forced. As well as the buoyancy and silvery quality of the LHQ's vibrato-light playing, there's a real sense of invention – of making the music afresh – with a questioning, almost improvisatory quality to the great ascending violin solo at the climax of Op 77 No 2's slow movement. Dotted rhythms have a spirited kick. The players spring away from the earthy bagpipe drones in the finale of Op 77 No 1, and at both the start and finish of the finale of Op 77 No 2 it sounds as if they're inventing the music on the wing. The final bars feel entirely satisfying and anything but valedictory. Again, that's as it should be.

Delightfully, the LHQ have included the exquisite one-off Quartet Op 42 as an encore, and the first movement brought my only really serious reservation about this set. Played with impassioned expression at a slow *Andante* that isn't remotely *innocentemente* (Haydn's marking), it loses much of the terseness and bittersweet wit that gives this miraculous little work its piquancy. With both repeats observed, that first

movement comes out longer than the other three combined.

On the other hand – and possibly this was intentional – if you are going straight on to the second disc and *The Seven Last Words*, it makes an excellent transition to a performance on the most expansive scale. The dark-and-light contrast between ceremonial grandeur and intimate emotion; the pregnant silences; the tender violin phrasing in 'Mater, ecce filius tuus' and the epic solemnity and unearthly sheen at the opening of 'Consummatum est' – it all adds up to a wholly persuasive case not just for the quartet version of the *Words* but for a historically informed approach, too. And of course the spacious acoustic and almost orchestral range of tone-colour are entirely appropriate to a work that English audiences (as Richard Wigmore mentions in his excellent booklet note) called 'Haydn's Passion'. If you have enjoyed this cycle so far, you will not be disappointed.

Richard Bratby

Knox

'Open Spaces'

Microtonal Blues[a]. One Finger[b]. Quartet for One (String Quartet for Solo Viola)[c]. Rick O'Shea[d]. String Quartets[e] – No 1, 'Satellites'; No 2, 'Four into Twenty'. Ten Fingers[f]

[bc]**Garth Knox** *va* [e]**Ragazze Quartet** ([d]Rosa Arnold, [f]Jeanita Vriens van Tongeren *vns* [b]Annemijn Bergkotte *va* [a]Rebecca Wise *vc*)

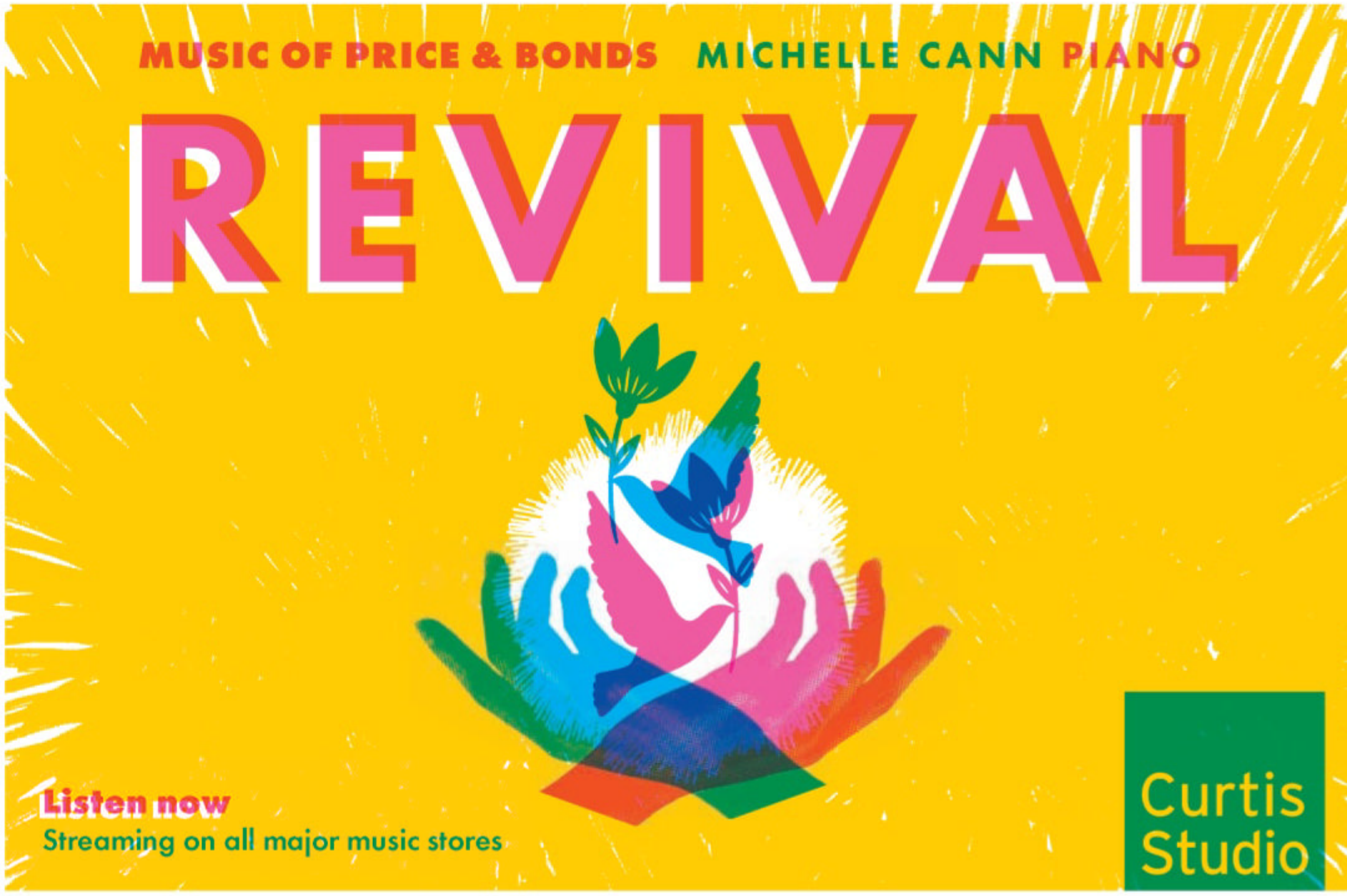
Channel Classics (CCS44623 • 58')

With his background as a viola player in Ensemble Intercontemporain and the Arditti Quartet, together with such enterprising collections as 'D'Amore' (ECM, 9/08) and 'Saltarello' (9/12), Garth Knox is a musician whose sheer versatility and virtuosity are no less evident in his work as a composer.

Written for Kronos and charting 'different aspects of satellites and space', the First Quartet (2015) unfolds from the equivocal interplay of dynamism and stasis, through stark contrasts between sunrises opulently evoked by the ensemble with darkness as fugitively conveyed by solo instruments, to temporal and spatial dimensions that multiply according to the variety of bow strokes used. Less metaphysical in concept while no less diverting in content, the Second Quartet was composed for the Ragazze and draws intriguing parallels between the 1920s and 2020s. This involves contrasts of mechanisation and intuition, of timbre and rhythm between duos, of inertia and (non-) movement; finally, between paraphrases on a famous dance then and now. Designated 'string quartet for solo viola', *Quartet for One* (2020) emulates the sound of each instrument in respectively nervous, expressive, sentimental and virtuoso terms.

Playable between the movements of each quartet, between each quartet or as separate items, the four solo pieces are all drawn from Knox's *Open Spaces* collections and explore aspects of instrumental technique to an exacting yet, once more, engaging degree. Hence the soulful folk-inflected glissandos of *One Finger* (2009), the cascading pizzicatos of *Ten Fingers*, the subtly nuanced harmonies of *Microtonal Blues* and the undulating gestures of *Rick O'Shea* (all 2018).

Several of these pieces have previously been recorded, but not with the sense of enjoyment as radiated by the Ragazze Quartet or Knox himself. Vividly recorded and with informative notes, this new release is both provocative and engaging, and can be warmly recommended. **Richard Whitehouse**



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Ligeti

'Metamorphosis'
Andante and Allegretto. String Quartets – No 1, 'Métamorphoses nocturnes'; No 2
Diotima Quartet
Pentatone (PTC5187 061 • 54')

When listening to Ligeti's pre-Cologne music – which is, of course, not the music he became famous for – part of the fun is in spotting nascent elements of his later style. So the opening movement of Ligeti's First String Quartet, overwhelmingly Bartókian in style, features perpetually rising scales presaging the later clockwork-style mechanical processes in works such as the piano Étude 'Désordre'. The later *Allegretto, un poco giovale* teases out a wonderful undulating metamorphosis of the core four-note motif. Often during this wonderful Quatuor Diotima reading, Stravinsky is recalled as well as Bartók, in abrupt contrasts, repetitions and stratified textures.

Almost 30 years after the Arditti Quartet's disc for the Ligeti Edition, 20 years after the LaSalle and Hagen Quartets' disc on DG (the LaSalle reissued from 1970) and 15 years after the Parker Quartet on Naxos, this new Quatuor Diotima disc should become the go-to Ligeti string quartets disc for the foreseeable future. By comparison with the Arditti, the Diotima recording quality is brighter, and alongside this, the performance has more of a sense of ongoing movement, of gliding across musical architectures in restless motion. The Diotima's balance of agility and virtuosity is remarkable. After the First String Quartet, two brief student works are included as a breather, the lyrical, tonal *Andante cantabile* and *Allegretto poco capriccioso*.

Ligeti's Second String Quartet, from 1969, has always been one of my favourite of his works. The polarity of febrile harmonies and thunderous growl; the shimmering lightning-flash flourishes; the hybridising of statistical techniques and the absurdist babble: all of Ligeti is here. The fine details are on show on this disc in high-definition audio, from blazing tremolo in the *Allegro nervoso* to the *Sostenuto, molto calmo*'s extended drone beset by overbowed fissures and decay. It's clear that Quatuor Diotima have pondered upon the work for some time. They face Ligeti's nocturnal phantasmagoria head-on, and in doing so they render it in all its hard-won beauty. **Liam Cagney**

String Quartets – selected comparisons:
Arditti Qt — *Sony Classical SK62306 (1/97)*
LaSalle Qt, Hagen Qt — *DG 477 6443GH4 (12/06)*
Parker Qt — *Naxos 8 570781 (4/10)*

Turnage

Shroud. Winter's Edge
Piatti Quartet
Dephian (DCD34254 • 53')

No doubt many of us still think of Mark-Anthony Turnage and his music as incorrigibly urban, yet it is more than 20 years since the Nash Ensemble foregrounded his lyrical side in a selection of small ensemble works (Black Box, 8/01). Composition of *Anna Nicole*, a raucous operatic exploration of media celebrity, coincided with the start of a run of string quartets comprising *Twisted Blues with Twisted Ballad* (2008), *Contusion* (2013), *Shroud* (2016) and *Winter's Edge* (2016-17). All four have now been recorded by the Piatti Quartet, albeit for different labels (Champs Hill, 11/18; NMC – see page 56).

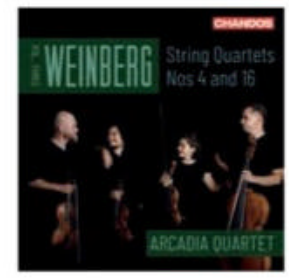
The third and fourth of these scores are coupled logically, if a mite ungenerously here. *Shroud* was written for the celebrated Emerson Quartet, scheduled to bow out at the end of this season. It would be unfair to view the present rendition as in any way second best. The insistently agonised 'Threnody' needs no weightier projection. Three shorter movements follow, quizzical in their loping gait. All are characterised with unswerving commitment. A final 'Lament' returns to grief-stricken memorialising and again the eloquence is striking.

Textural economy is almost as much a feature of *Winter's Edge*, another deeply personal score. Predating the perils of Covid, its generally softer grain (and perhaps the title itself) would seem to relate to the dedication 'for my mother's 80th birthday'. The movements remain unnamed this time and the indeterminacy extends to an absence of expressive tempo indications (there are only metronome marks). The finale is slow, mainly pensive in character. The end comes suddenly and without fuss. Like Shostakovich, whose idiom is sometimes recalled in both works, Turnage must be counted a realist.

Remembering the high-impact (Prince-inspired?) airlessness of some early Turnage recordings, the choice of an ecclesiastical venue comes as a surprise. In fact the music-making is expertly focused, without excessive resonance, by producer/engineer Paul Baxter. Andrew Stewart's annotations are helpful too. Recommended. **David Gutman**

Weinberg

'String Quartets, Vol 3'
String Quartets – No 4, Op 20; No 16, Op 130
Arcadia Quartet
Chandos (CHAN20180 • 67')



The Arcadia Quartet continue their cycle of string quartets by Mieczysław Weinberg (previous volumes were reviewed in 3/21 and 5/22) with a coupling of two of the undoubted highlights, where any influence of those by Shostakovich or Bartók has been absorbed and transcended.

Second in a group of four quartets Weinberg penned later during the Second World War, the Fourth Quartet (1944) is his earliest masterpiece in this genre. A subtly ambivalent work, the quixotic manner of its opening *Allegro commodo* only obliquely prepares for the volatile aggression of its Scherzo then implacable rhetoric of its *Largo marciale*, before its final *Allegro moderato* attempts a synthesis of these conflicting moods that only arrives at the most tentative of resolutions. Somewhere between the unforced opulence of the Danel and tensile immediacy of the Silesian quartets, the Arcadia project this piece in all its searching emotion and deep underlying equivocation.

After a sequence of overtly experimental pieces, formally unpredictable and replacing tempo indications with metronome markings, the Sixteenth Quartet (1981) might seem a reaction in its recourse to four movements and an idiom redolent of the composer's earlier music. Such appearances are inevitably deceptive: whether in the gradually subsiding declamation of its initial *Allegro*, scabrous agitation (or edgily whimsical Trio) of its Scherzo then the brooding desolation of its *Lento*, with a final *Moderato* whose lilting gait reduces to a vanishing-point of intense inwardness. Here the dedication to the memory of Weinberg's sister Ester is made graphic and, even more than their rivals, the Arcadia's response feels heart-rending in its pathos.

The close but never airless immediacy of the sound and detailed annotations by David Fanning readily enhance the performances. Those who have been following this cycle need not hesitate; anyone new to this music could hardly do better than begin here. **Richard Whitehouse**

Selected comparisons:
Danel Qt *CPO CPO777 313-2 (4/08)*
Silesian Qt *CD Accord ACD284/291 (oas)*

Seicento Stravagante

Anonymous Canzona su partimento **Castello** Sonata prima **Cesare** La Foccarina **Dalla Casa** Susanne un jour **Falconieri** La Monarca **GB Fontana** Sonata seconda. Sonata terza **Frescobaldi** Canzon terza detta La Lucchesina **A Gabrieli** Canzon francese detta Qui la dira **Kapsberger** Sinfonia 13 **Marini** Sonata per organo e violino o cornetto **Notari** Ahi, che s'acresce in me **Padovano** Toccata del sesto tono **Rognoni** Ung gay berger **Rognoni Taeggio** Pulchra es, amica mea **Salvatore** Toccata seconda del nono tono **Seicento Stravagante** (David Brutti *cornetto* Nicola Lamon *org/hpd*)
BIS (BIS2526 SACD • 64')

Seicento Stravagante are a cornetto and keyboard duo, formed in 2018 and here making their recording debut in core repertoire – Italian music of the 17th century. Most of the composers will be familiar to anyone who likes this kind of thing, with styles ranging from brash, new, *stylus phantasticus* Baroque sonatas with continuo by Castello, Fontana, Cesare and Marini to gentler works based on Renaissance vocal models by the likes of Rognoni, Rognoni Taeggio, Dalla Casa, Notari and Frescobaldi. Though much of the music is today more commonly associated with the violin, the cornetto was from the start seen as a legitimate alternative.

The duo claim as a key aim the highlighting of historic Italian organs, and indeed the two instruments used here have a fine pedigree: a brightly shining, up-close late 17th-century model by Paolo Cipri in Monte San Giovanni in Bologna does the bulk of the work (including the solo pieces by Padovano, Salvatore and Anon), while two tracks are presented on a softer, richer and slightly more reserved anonymous Venetian organ from around 1660. Elsewhere a pleasantly plinky Italian harpsichord also serves, as does a fiery regal. Nicola Lamon plays them all with skill and refinement; his continuo realisations contribute active support while not being over-fussy or intrusive, and perhaps the only thing to be wished for is a little more structural shaping for the organ solos.

The cornetto-playing of David Brutti is more distinctive. His biography tells us he was a saxophonist before falling in love with Renaissance and Baroque music and taking up the cornetto – a formidable challenge at any stage of an instrumentalist's career. His virtuosity is evident in the sonatas, and his lyrical skill in pieces such as Notari's song transcription 'Ahi, che s'acresce in me', while both are on show in Dalla Casa's flowing gloss on Lassus's beautiful 'Susanne un jour'. Where Brutti's saxophone self really shows itself, however, is in a surprising readiness to sweeten things with suave vibrato and in a forthright, confidently projected manner that brings new character to his instrument. In two pieces he uses something called a 'mute cornetto' that sounds almost like a cor anglais, and in other ones there is a brassy brightness that in the concluding Marini sonata stirs thoughts of Maurice André's trumpet. Remarkable stuff! **Lindsay Kemp**

'An American Rhapsody'

Azmeh/Hekkema Airports **Barber** Excursions, Op 20 **Burleigh** Southland Sketches – 3rd & 4th movts **Ellington** In a Sentimental Mood **Ellington/Strayhorn** Satin Doll **Gershwin** Rhapsody in Blue **Holliday/Herzog/Dolphy** God Bless the Child **Moondog** New Amsterdam **Price** Piano Sonata – 1st & 2nd movts **Wonder** Overjoyed
Calefax
Pentatone (PTC5187 046 SACD • 79')

Following a number of releases (including the 2018 cross-genre anthology 'Hidden Gems' and Hans Abrahamsen's *Walden* – Winter & Winter, 11/13), Calefax is pre-eminent among reed quintets, with 'An American Rhapsody' surveying a typically wide variety of music from the past century.

Not even its devotees can have imagined Gershwin's trailblazing masterpiece so envisaged but Raaf Hekkema's arrangement is nothing if not idiomatic, not least the degree to which the piano part has been sublimated into the overall texture, a failure to up the emotional ante at climaxes being the only drawback. Equally effective are the latter two of Harry Burleigh's appealing miniatures, originally for violin and piano, but the highlight here is surely Barber's adept evoking of 'regional American idioms' whose origins for solo piano are barely even hinted at in a transformation by Jelte Althuis that proves as characterful as it is understated. His arrangement of the first two movements (in reverse order) from Florence Price's main work for piano is hardly less expert in its bringing out the nostalgic fervency of this music.

The other half-dozen pieces doubtless enliven Calefax recitals. With a little help from Eric Dolphy, Billie Holiday's evergreen fully exudes real pathos, then two staples from the Duke Ellington playbook are no less attuned to their fusing of formal precision with slow-burning eloquence. The atmospheric take on an 'almost classic' by Stevie Wonder precedes Syrian-born Kinan Azmeh's affecting paean to harmony (social and musical) arising from discord, the disarming strains of Moondog's eulogy to his adopted city rounding off this collection.

Recorded with spacious immediacy and informatively annotated by Hekkema, this is a release to be savoured in full or enjoyed in part; an impressive demonstration of Calefax's range of sympathies across repertoire that this questing ensemble has succeeded in making its own.
Richard Whitehouse

'Jeux de couleurs'

Celis Piano Trio, Op 5 **Debussy** La mer (arr Beamish) **Ravel** Piano Trio
Trio Khaldei
Evil Penguin (EPRC0049 • 65')

'An orchestra of three' is how Trio Khaldei describe themselves, and this latest disc could almost serve as a sonic manifesto. In the age of the palm court, it was common for piano trios to play transcriptions of orchestral works (my student trio had a lot of fun with a salon reduction of Chabrier's *España*), and Sally Beamish's trio arrangement of Debussy's *La mer* follows in that tradition, although it's also a subtle and highly imaginative re-conception of the orchestral original in terms of a wholly different medium. Beamish's palette includes tremolando and pizzicato, but nothing much more gimmicky than that.

So the 'Jeux de vagues' becomes a flashing, darting scherzo and at the moment (about 5'00" into the first movement) where Debussy deploys his 12 cellos in close harmony, Beamish manages to preserve that sense of tactile lushness without any audible contrivance or strain. Trio Khaldei go at it with immense verve and sweep, Pieter Jansen's violin wheeling high above the mountainous surges of Barbara Baltussen's piano. The recorded balance does tend to favour the keyboard (the left hand in

Lyrical and eloquent: the Piatti Quartet perform music of Mark-Anthony Turnage, the usually extrovert composer showing his reflective side – see review on page 59

particular), but there's no denying the sense of ebb and flow.

It makes an excellent counterbalance for Trio Khaldei's expansive Ravel: an altogether more transparent reading but one that – again – develops an almost symphonic weight and grandeur. That same impassioned, headlong approach makes a persuasive case for the single-movement Trio, Op 5 (1958) by the Flemish composer Frits Celis: a work that begins with an angular, utilitarian briskness reminiscent of Hindemith or Rawsthorne but which quickly expands into full-blooded Romantic lyricism. Apparently it's something of a calling card for Trio Khaldei, and you can tell.

Richard Bratby

'The Stradgrass Sessions'

Bartók 44 Duos, Sz98 – No 35, Ruthenian Kolomejka; No 39, Serbian Dance; No 43, Pizzicato **Cleveland** Lazy Katie **Corigliano** Stomp **Foster** Meditation on 'My Old Kentucky Home' **Hull** Chasin' Skies **Lark** Hysedelje. Jig and Pop. Le Soka – Cheese in the Wine **Meyer** Concert Duo for Violin and Bass **Ysaÿe** Solo Violin Sonata, Op 27 No 5

Tessa Lark *vn* with **Michael Cleveland** *fiddle* **Jon Batiste** *pf* **Edgar Meyer** *db* **Sierra Hull** *mandolin*

First Hand (FHR100 • 49')

'The Stradgrass Sessions' – one of the more evocative album titles of late, conjuring late-into-the-night laughter, whiskey and musicians just having a grand old time. Violinist Tessa Lark brings us a smorgasbord of American folk styles, including some of her own compositions. Coined by Lark in 2015, the portmanteau refers to the 1683 ex-Gingold violin loaned to her at the time and her love for bluegrass traditions. There's not much of the laid-back Irish fiddler here, legs crossed and weatherworn; rather, the sound is much more vital, while still retaining the rhythmic energy and choppy articulation of bluegrass. Lark forges a link with composers of the classical violin canon, too, and a fresh perspective is offered to the works by Ysaÿe and Bartók. It's a meeting of worlds famously captured on 'The Goat Rodeo Sessions' (and Lark's album title is perhaps a tip of the cowboy hat to this now-classic recording).

The album's highlight is Edgar Meyer's *Concert Duo* for violin and bass, for which Lark is joined in performance by the composer. It's a remarkable sound world, full of quiet, angular funk. The duo's rhythmic energy doesn't reveal itself too obviously, yet every musical line is tantalisingly animated. Meyer plays with glorious nimbleness, oscillating with ease between groan and ping. Lark is capricious, ecstatic then conversational, friendly then weird. She more than holds her own across the album. Her sound is bright, with no-nonsense attack and clarity of note. Sparing vibrato, combined with a gorgeously harmonic approach towards intonation, makes for a wonderful warmth on her Maggini of *c*1600.

The encore – Stephen Foster's *Meditation on 'My Old Kentucky Home'* – doesn't quite sit as a fitting end to the album. After what is a fairly relentless stream of energy and muscle, it's far too sedate and saccharine.

Mark Seow

PHOTOGRAPHY: FOXBRUSH FILMS

Arturo Toscanini

Richard Osborne takes our centenary series into the 1940s, when maestro Toscanini made his Gramophone cover debut and launched America's first-ever series of televised concerts

Arturo Toscanini was born 10 years before the invention of the phonograph yet remains a living presence because of it, a life force from a vanished age whose work refuses to date.

His first recordings were pre-electric, made with players from La Scala, Milan, on tour in the United States in 1920; his last, completed in New York in 1954 at the age of 87, was an account of Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera* that remains the most elemental and erotically charged of all accounts of the piece. 'I think that Toscanini's small orchestra is the most effective of all on the gramophone,' said Compton Mackenzie of that 1920 recording of the finale of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, writing in the inaugural issue of *The Gramophone* in April 1923.

Toscanini possessed two qualities that were invaluable for recording: first, the purity and beauty of sound any Toscanini-trained orchestra presented to the microphones; secondly, a conducting style, shorn of all mannerism, that bore repeated hearing. To which, writing in November 1926, Mackenzie added a third: the electric charge of the conducting. What might seem vivid in the concert hall doesn't necessarily make a comparable impact on record; and where recorded impact was concerned, Mackenzie suggested, Toscanini was 'supreme'.

It was principally through the gramophone that Toscanini became the most venerated conductor of his age – 'iconic', as latter-day usage would have it. As to the actual iconography, that, too, made an early appearance in *The Gramophone* in January 1930 in the form of a caricature in the Italian Futurist style by Fernando Autori. It was the image chosen to accompany the publication's first full-length profile of Toscanini, written not by the editor but by his wife, the pianist, writer and all-round woman of culture Faith Compton Mackenzie. It's a most revealing piece, not least because of the insights it gives into Toscanini's relations with the four composers with whom he was most closely associated: Verdi and Puccini, both of whom he worked with and knew, and the two giants of 19th-century German music, Beethoven and Wagner.

Where recorded impact was concerned, suggested Compton Mackenzie in 1926, Toscanini was 'supreme'

Virtually unknown outside Italy and the United States, even as late as 1930, Toscanini had long been a household name to the Mackenzies, partly owing to Faith's extended residence on the Italian island of Capri in the 1910s and her intimate relationship with Renata Borgatti, the piano-playing daughter of revered tenor Giuseppe Borgatti – Toscanini's Siegfried and Tristan in groundbreaking Wagner performances in turn-of-the-century Italy.

Not the least of Toscanini's achievements was the skill with which he grafted Austro-German music onto Latin rootstock, and vice versa. This was heard to particular effect in his conducting of the Beethoven symphonies, of which Mrs Mackenzie gives an eloquent report. His reputation as a Wagner conductor, however, stretched back further, to a performance of *Tristan und Isolde* which the composer's son, Siegfried, heard in Turin in 1901.

This was an era, it's worth remembering, in which Wagner could do no wrong and most Italian opera – all but a handful of acknowledged masterpieces – was treated as little more

DEFINING MOMENTS

•1867 – *Born to Italian 'red-shirt' father*
Born in Parma, March 25, the son of a self-employed tailor and foot soldier in Garibaldi's republican army. Aged 11, wins scholarship to Parma's Royal School of Music, where the cello is his assigned instrument; graduates 1885

•1886 – *Conducting debut of a phenomenon*
June: conducts Verdi's *Aida*, from memory at an hour's notice, while on Brazil tour with Italian opera company as cellist and assistant chorus master. November: Italian debut in Turin

•1898 – *Begins transformation of first of two opera companies*
Leaves Turin for La Scala, Milan, whose fortunes he helps transform, as he does those of the New York Met from 1908

•1920–21 – *American tour and first recordings*
Takes Milan orchestra on eight-month tour of US; makes first recordings for Victor company in Camden, New Jersey

•1928 – *Pastures new*
Leaves La Scala, Milan to lead New York Philharmonic. 1930: takes the orchestra on tour of Europe, marking start of memorable decade of concert and opera performances there

•1937 – *The conductor as national and international celebrity*
First concert with specially created NBC SO draws record radio audience; name known to 70 per cent of the American population

•1942 – *Overtones of war*
Wins bitter fight to stage US premiere of Shostakovich's *Leningrad* Symphony. Start of two-year strike halts recording in US

•1948 – *Post-war telecasts and recording*
NBC begins live televising of Toscanini concerts

•1954 – *Retirement and death*
Final broadcasts. Devotes retirement to recorded legacy before death in New York, January 16, 1957

PHOTOGRAPHY: THE TULLY POTTER COLLECTION

than cheap entertainment. Mrs Mackenzie cites *La traviata*, whose tunes had become 'stale, clotted and worn with careless use; we have heard it described as quaint and ridiculous, and perhaps we have agreed.' But with Toscanini in charge, 'It is almost with a caress that the lion of conductors draws out the familiar melodies that tell the poignant tale of Violetta.'

Toscanini's first appearance on the cover of *The Gramophone* was in May 1942, shared with his son-in-law Vladimir Horowitz at the time of the release of their famous recording of Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto. His first solo cover, in June 1949, was linked to his recording of extracts from Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette*. Inside that edition, the disc was subject to a blistering attack, not on Toscanini's conducting, but on the NBC recording. The review was by the first of a new breed of *Gramophone* reviewers drawn from the higher echelons of the BBC music department, the 34-year-old Lionel Salter, who clearly knew what he was talking about.

Toscanini liked the restricted ambience of NBC's Studio 8H, given that he could hear everything from the rostrum. What was problematic was not so much the studio or its equipment (16- and 17-inch wide-groove acetate discs revolving at 33⅓rpm) but erratic microphone placements and the often poor quality of the commercial transfers.

One of the great 'ifs' regarding Toscanini's legacy is what might have happened had the rise of Fascism and the Second World War not intervened, tying him to the United States, an American radio orchestra and radio station production values.

In a fascinating reminiscence by John Amis, 'Legge on Toscanini', published in *Gramophone* in June 1990, we learn that EMI's Walter Legge had the temerity to tell Toscanini that the tempos in his 1946 broadcast recording of *La traviata* were mostly too fast. Toscanini asked why he thought this, but later conceded that he'd lacked a suitable producer at NBC – someone who would dare advise him, as we know Legge advised Sir Thomas Beecham, Victor de Sabata, Herbert von Karajan and other stellar talents with whom he worked and frequently did battle. Not that the American-made recordings obscure the essential nature of Toscanini's genius. Mackenzie spoke of Toscanini's 'impact' on record, much as philosopher Sir Isaiah Berlin, who heard him regularly in London and Salzburg in the 1930s, spoke of 'the intensity, the seriousness, the sublime *terribilità*' of his conducting. 'One left the concert hall or opera house', he told me, 'convinced that this, and only this, was the truth.'

Poet, polymath and part-time music critic Ezra Pound – a familiar of the Mackenzies and a good friend of Renata Borgatti – defined another aspect of Toscanini's craft as his ability to sustain the cumulative effect of an exact rhythm more perfectly, and over a longer period, than 'temperamental and moody performers' thought of attempting. (Go to Toscanini's superb 1953 recording of Berlioz's allegedly loosely written *Harold in Italy* to get a sense of what Pound was driving at.)

The words 'temperamental' and 'moody' may have been aimed at Serge Koussevitzky or, more generally, Wilhelm Furtwängler. If the latter, it was a perpetuation of one of performing history's most futile jousts. Writing in 1939, Neville Cardus described Toscanini's Beethoven as 'the most musically comprehensive of our time, if not the most poetically comprehensive'. The fact is, we needed Toscanini's Beethoven and Furtwängler's. If Toscanini was peerless in the Seventh Symphony and Furtwängler in the *Eroica*, in the Ninth both were needed, according to one's mood or inclination.

Toscanini was a classicist at heart, with a classicist's love of light, logic, orderliness and physical beauty. It's an approach that didn't cover all eventualities, but it served. 'He has soul, poetry, flexibility, dash, refinement, dramatic instinct,' wrote Puccini in 1922. 'In short, a real miracle.' G

THE ESSENTIAL RECORDING

Verdi Otello
Vinay *ten* Nelli *sop* Valdengo *bar* et al; NBC SO / Toscanini
Naxos

Toscanini was the second solo cello in the opera's premiere in 1887, and this 1947 broadcast, under a conductor the elderly Verdi greatly admired, remains, even now, the most elemental and texturally articulate of all.

Instrumental

Andrew Farach-Colton enjoys a Mignone album from Martin Jones:
'In the hushed central section of Paulistana, Jones's pearlescent pianissimo casts a heady spell ▶ REVIEW ON PAGE 67

Jeremy Nicholas admires a nature-driven album from Zlata Chochieva:
'The Liszt leaps off the page, with fabulous left-hand articulation, tonal colouring and sheer pianistic relish' ▶ REVIEW ON PAGE 70

JS Bach · F Couperin

'The Complete Works for Keyboard, Vol 8: Köthen, 1717-1723 – For Maria Barbara'
JS Bach Adagio, BWV968[a]. Chaconne (after BWV1004)[a]. Fantasia, BWV542[a]. Six French Suites, BWV812-817[b]. Pedal-Exercitium, BWV598[a]. Prelude, BWV999[b]. Prelude and Fugue, BWV539[a]. Sonata, BWV964[a]. Three-Part Inventions (Sinfonias), BWV787-801[a]. Two-Part Inventions, BWV772-786[a] **F Couperin** L'art de toucher le clavecin: Preludes[b] – B minor; D minor; E minor; G minor
Benjamin Alard [a]*clav*/[b]*hpd*
Harmonia Mundi (HMM90 2469/71 ③ • 3h 24')

Benjamin Alard has arrived at the eighth volume of a projected 18 of all Bach's keyboard works. As he explains in the booklet note, this instalment assembles 'works connected with Bach's inner circle and his moments of solitude and sadness following the death of his first wife, Maria Barbara (1684-1720)'. Alard plays two instruments. The first is a 2018 clavichord by Émile Jobin after a 1773 Friederici, equipped with a modern pedalboard. The second is an antique harpsichord by Couchet (*c*1645) restored by Blanchet (*c*1720) from the collection of the Musée Instrumental de Provins. We know very little about Maria Barbara, the mother of Bach's first seven children. We do know, however, that in the summer of 1720 when Bach left with his patron, Prince Leopold of Cöthen, for a journey of two months, his wife was in good health. Bach only learnt of her illness and death when he returned to Cöthen.

The probity of Alard's interpretations is bolstered by the intelligence of his programming. Bach completed his cycle of solo violin works in 1720 and often demonstrated them on the keyboard, his preferred instrument. The D minor Sonata, BWV964, based on the A minor Solo Violin Sonata, is a case in point. An arrangement of the famous D minor Chaconne is also included. Rather than two discrete sets of 15, Alard presents the Inventions and Sinfonias together, C major two-part Invention followed by C major three-part Sinfonia, and so on. And given Bach's admiration for Couperin and their purported correspondence, Alard prefaces each of the six *French Suites* with a Prelude from *L'art de toucher le clavecin*.

Alard's approach is *cantabile* above all. This is not to say that kinaesthesia is lacking; dance movements are lively and evocative. These affects are achieved of course by varieties of attack and release, an extraordinary range of which Alard has at his command. There is also a centredness to his interpretations, so that while listening to them it is difficult to imagine alternative approaches. It's the sort of music-making that, its intellectual grasp notwithstanding, clearly emanates from the heart. **Patrick Rucker**

JS Bach

'Complete Lute Works & Other Transcriptions'
Fugue, BWV1000. Partitas – BWV997; BWV1006*a*; BWV1013 (transcr North). Prelude, Fugue and Allegro, BWV998. Prelude, BWV999. Suites – BWV995; BWV996. Toccata and Fugue, BWV565 (transcr North). Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme, BWV645 (transcr North)
Nigel North *lute*
Deux-Elles (DXL1194 ② • 148')

Nigel North's four-disc series for Linn of 'Bach on the Lute' back in the 1990s was rightly admired: 'performances that combine good style and intelligence with heart and sensibility, and in which phrases are naturally breathed through articulation and dynamics', wrote John Duarte of the first release (4/95). So what is this now from him under the title of Bach's 'Complete Lute Works & Other Transcriptions'? Ah well, back then he was excusing himself from the some of the lute-hostile technical problems thrown up by the fact that Bach was probably writing for the *Lautenwerck* – a keyboard instrument that imitated the sound of the lute – and allowing himself the treat of making his own, more satisfyingly idiomatic transcriptions of the Solo Violin Sonatas and Partitas and the Solo Cello Suites. Now, almost 30 years later, he says 'it is finally time for me to embrace "Bach's so-called lute music"'.

This means that there are only two pieces common to both sets: the Suite, BWV995, better known as the Fifth Cello Suite, which North considers to be the only one 'worthy to be called real lute music', and the Partita, BWV1006*a* (Third Violin Partita). Comparisons with the 1990s versions (his own transcriptions, remember) reveal more spacious tempos and a softer and more intimate manner. Where the firmly projected earlier performance appeared to revel in the freedom and exhilaration of textures designed by North for his own highly competent fingers, here we get what might seem a more wary approach (is the cautious shift at 2'20" in the Prelude a way of negotiating one of Bach's lute awkwardnesses?), but which on more considered listening could just as easily be a reflection of a relaxed acquaintance with these marvellous pieces, one that relishes the sheer beauty of how Bach put his music together, savours its harmonies and lingers at its important corners. How many players take such care over such things as the Gavotte II in BWV995 and the Menuet II in BWV1006*a*?

This way of thinking pervades the entire set. Preludes such as those of BWV998, BWV999 and BWV1006*a* flow with finely judged give and take, and gently phase with light and shade. Fugues such as BWV1000 and BWV998 (so beautifully threaded with the chorale tune *Vom Himmel hoch*) progress with sure but flexible tread. Dance movements have a nicely swinging momentum, for instance in the Allemande of BWV996 or the Loure of BWV1006*a*.

North adds three transcriptions of his own. The D minor Toccata and Fugue

works well, and in keeping with the rest is less motoric on the lute than the organ, but the chorale prelude *Wachet auf* stumbles – somehow the texture just doesn't feel right. Best of all is the A minor Solo Flute Partita, BWV1013, its opening broken chords gaining a pleasing sense of dialogue from North's subtle skill. Here, as in so many places in this set, is musicianship of wisdom and experience.

Lindsay Kemp

Embracing Bach: Nigel North brings subtlety and wisdom to the composers music for lute

Beethoven

Symphonies (arr FX Scharwenka) – No 2, Op 36; No 7, Op 92

Tessa Uys, Ben Schoeman *pf*

Somm (SOMMCD0666 • 79')

Scharwenka's ingenious four-hand versions of the Beethoven symphonies are not easy to carry off. They may have been intended for less virtuoso pianists than Liszt's two-hand transcriptions were, but Scharwenka took advantage of – or was seduced by – his medium, filling out the textures with more doublings and tremolos than could fit under 10 fingers. Such sonic luxury, especially emerging from a single instrument, can swamp the details. As a result, while Scharwenka's transcriptions require less digital prowess than Liszt's, they demand more scrupulous balance. Then, of course, as in all four-hand music, the cramped quarters put pressure on coordination.

There are no complaints, however, about the forthright performances by Tessa Uys and Ben Schoeman. Jeremy Nicholas praised the earlier instalments in this series, calling attention to the 'clarity' and 'conviction' of the playing (A/21); and those qualities re-emerge here. Uys and Schoeman cut through the clutter with impressive unanimity; and their finely gauged handling of dynamics and their rhythmic drive – especially in the Seventh (try the feral snap of the third movement) – assure that the symphonies emerge with their shape intact, even shorn of orchestral colour. It all sounds idiomatic, both as Beethoven and as piano music.

Yet you have to wonder. Originally, such transcriptions made the symphonic literature familiar to music lovers without access to orchestral concerts. Nowadays, they're regaining popularity for the opposite reason: by offering a new perspective, they make the standard repertoire seem less familiar. But if we've reached the point where the canon needs to be refreshed, why cure our restlessness by seeking new ways of framing overplayed classics, rather than by looking for alternatives? It seems counterproductive to celebrate Scharwenka for his recasting of Beethoven while most of his own music remains forgotten.

On its own terms, though, this is an imposing recording, well engineered. Robert Matthew-Walker's notes centre on Beethoven rather than on Scharwenka, but as expected, they're knowledgeable and illuminating. **Peter J Rabinowitz**

Debussy

Estampes. Images – Rondes de printemps (transcr G Gasparian). Préludes – Book 1

Jean-Paul Gasparian *pf*

Naïve (V7958 • 68')

The recording was made in the Salon de Musique, Hôtel de la Fondation Singer-Polignac, Paris. This has an acoustic that I thought worked very much in

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Gasparian's favour for the Rachmaninov programme I welcomed in the May 2022 issue. Here, I'm afraid, it works against him – unless, that is, you like your Debussy played in a vast empty ballroom. It is a sound, however, that clearly pleases the pianist, for in a booklet interview he reveals that 'we worked very hard on the positioning of the microphones, and we constantly adjusted the regulation of the instrument: the challenge was to obtain a piano sound that was as un-pianistic as possible, if I dare put it like that'.

But this is only one unsatisfactory element of the album. I am, in general, puzzled by Gasparian's response to Debussy. Awash with pedal, his tempos are not just slow. They are lethargic. The Delphic dancers, for example, albeit labelled *Lent et grave*, seem to be on Valium (4'07" as opposed to something like Gieseking's 3'15" in 1938 or Bavouzet at 2'54"). The sudden outbursts in 'Le vent dans la plaine' had me reaching for the score to check Debussy's dynamic: *forte*. Gasparian startles you with *fortissimo* stabs without registering the following *piano* marking. Surely 'La fille aux cheveux de lin' (*Très calme et doucement expressif*) should inspire more tenderness than this boldly assertive take. No, as a set this is uncompetitive when compared with the likes of Gieseking (1938 and 1953), Michelangeli, Freire and (my current benchmark) Bavouzet.

And it is Bavouzet who again offers pianism of a far more refined character in *Estampes*. On the second volume of his superbly recorded *intégrale*, 'Pagodes' and 'La soirée dans Grenade' are languid and atmospheric, with 'Jardins sous la pluie' played with an exhilarating light touch and minimum pedal. Gasparian's USP is the premiere recording of his father's resourceful 2009 transcription of 'Rondes de printemps': No 3 from (the orchestral suite) *Images*, clever programming when you know that Debussy quotes the folk song 'Nous n'irons plus au bois' both here and in 'Jardins sous la pluie'. Transcription fanciers will ignore any of the above misgivings and go for this.

Jeremy Nicholas

Estampes, Préludes – selected comparison:

Bavouzet *CHAN10743 (7/07, 1/08 – aas)*

Ferrabosco II

'Music to hear ...'
Lessons for 1, 2, and 3 Viols – Three Suites
Richard Boothby *va da gamba* with **Asako Morikawa** *va da gamba*
Signum (SIGCD757 • 54')

Alfonso Ferrabosco the younger (*c*1575-1628) was one of the greatest exponents of and composers for the lyra viol, a fretted bowed instrument slightly smaller than the viola da gamba and fitted with metal sympathetic strings. Today its solo repertoire is almost exclusively performed on the gamba, and so it is here as Richard Boothby delves into Ferrabosco's 1609 *Lessons for 1, 2, and 3 Viols*.

Organising almains and galliards (all have a 'coranto' shadow) into three suites preceded by preludes, and with the last suite fittingly ending with a weighty pavan-coranto pair, Boothby reminds us that Ferrabosco was not only also an accomplished lutenist and singer but a valued collaborator of Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones. These are intimate performances of intimate music, yes; but the writing and the playing are such that chordal and contrapuntal textures, beefy bass lines and flute-like *cantabiles* just about do the job of an entire consort of viols.

As with his previous solo outings, Boothby often seems simply to luxuriate in the resonance of the instrument, in this case a Jane Julier after Henry Smith. Otherwise, he's busy infusing the quicker dances with a tension created by earthy down-beats and feather-light *détaché* strokes or investing the preludes, almains and solitary pavan with a sombre Dowlandesque melancholy. There are also some juicy pizzicato passages redolent of the lute, and while fellow gambist Asako Morikawa joins Boothby on just two tracks, her stylish duetting is a welcome contribution to this enjoyable release.

William Yeoman

Selected comparisons:

Phantasm, Kenny *Linn CKD527 (8/16)*
Sit Fast, Nyblin *Evidence EVCD034 (10/17)*

Mignone

O contratador dos diamantes – Congada. Cucumbizinho. Lendas sertanejas – No 4; No 6; No 8. Paulistana. Quatro Peças brasileiras. Serenada humorística. Four Sonatinas. Tango. Valsas de esquina – No 1; No 12. Valse élégante
Martin Jones *pf*
Nimbus (NI8113 • 68')

In his early twenties, Francisco Mignone (1897-1986) left his native Brazil to study in Milan. He spent nearly a decade in Italy and also Spain, and listening to his orchestral music – his *Festa das igrejas* (1940), say, or *Maracatu de Chico Rei* (1933) – one is tempted to label him a Brazilian Respighi. His piano music remains closer to home, however, hewing closer to the folkloric style of his younger Argentinian contemporaries Guastavino (whose complete piano music Martin Jones recorded in 2008) and Ginastera.

Jones focuses on Mignone's works from the 1930s and '40s, generally avoiding the more modernist- or Impressionist-influenced pieces like the *Transcendental études* that Clélia Iruzun includes on her Mignone recital (Lorelt, 11/07). Indeed, there's not much overlap between the two programmes. In general, Jones tends to avoid flashy pieces such as the *Dança do Botocudo* Iruzun offers, and when Jones and Iruzun do play the same music, the interpretative distinctions are clear. Reviewing Iruzun's disc, Guy Rickards praised her lightness of touch as being 'near ideal', and he's not wrong. Jones's touch is lighter still, his tempos more relaxed, the result as charming as it is elegant.

Jones includes a few salon-like pieces, including the *Valse élégante* and Nazarethesque *Tango* (both from 1931), three of the 10 gorgeously melancholy *Lendas sertanejas* ('Rustic Legends'), the first and last of the spare, lilting *Valsas de esquina* ('Street Corner Waltzes') and the four sonatinas. *Paulistana* (a miniature portrait of the people of São Paulo from 1942) is the longest work on the programme, and in the bright, bustling energy of its outer sections, it's perhaps the most assertive music, too. Yet it's the hushed central section that makes the strongest impression, especially as Jones's pearlescent *pianissimo* casts such a heady spell (listen starting around 2'54").

As usual, Nimbus's aural perspective puts quite a lot of air around Jones's piano, which is highly effective in this case where the emphasis is on atmosphere rather than brilliance. Warmly recommended.

Andrew Farach-Colton

Mozart

'Piano Sonatas, Vol 4'
Piano Sonatas – No 7, K309; No 13, K333; No 15, K533/494
Jean Muller *pf*
Hänssler Classic (HC22013 • 62')

Here reaching its fourth volume, Jean Muller's Mozart survey has been

garnering warm praise for its sensitivity to the idiom, clarity of vision and evenness of technique. The latest instalment sandwiches one of Mozart's most adventurous sonatas, the composite F major, K533/494 (the Rondo finale was written separately two years earlier), between two of his most beloved ones.

Certainly this is cultured and tasteful playing, with refined phrasing and voicing, and a fine sense of architecture. The Luxembourgeois pianist's own minimalist yet effective notes reflect his intelligence and stylistic awareness. However, his approach does strike me as somewhat constrained, based as it is mainly on a single affect per movement, rather than contrast. Sometimes this uniformity even stretches across movements, as with the first two movements of the B flat major Sonata, K333 (aside from the eerily other-worldly short episode in the second movement). It is almost like being in a room with the thermostat set comfortably but permanently between 18 and 19 degrees.

Compare, for example, with Pires's mercurial timbral changes and shifts of temperament in the opening movement of the F major Sonata, or with the Horowitzian childlike playfulness and risk-taking edginess Hamelin brings to K333. Occasionally, as in the C major Sonata, K309, Muller allows himself greater margins for imagination and intervention. But even here there is a sense of calculation and over-awareness, as with the somewhat blatant agogic accent before the sudden harmonic changes in the finale, or the exaggerated emphasis on the second beat in the opening bars of the F major Sonata's slow movement, almost as though he was reinstating a marking from old editions.

If you like your Mozart safe and middle-of-the-road, yet stylish and sufficiently subtle, Muller may be the answer to your prayers. If, like me, you value an extra degree of wit, grace, daring inventiveness and spontaneity, you need to look elsewhere.

Michelle Assay

Selected comparisons:

Piano Sonata No 13 – selected comparison:

Hamelin *Hyperion CDA68029 (5/15)*

Piano Sonata No 15 – selected comparison:

Pires *DG 437 546-2GH (7/93)*

Rzewski

'Late Piano Works'

Dreams – No 7, Ruins; No 8, Wake Up. Saints and Sinners. War Songs. Winter Nights

Bobby Mitchell *pf*

Naxos American Classics (8 559928 • 70')

Composed between 2008 and 2016, the works on this release count among the strongest and most evocative from Frederic Rzewski's later years. The pianist in these premiere recordings is Bobby Mitchell, whom Rzewski himself frequently singled out for praise.

The disc commences with 'Ruins' and 'Wake Up', the last two pieces from the 2014 piano cycle *Dreams*. In 'Ruins', an opening contrapuntal episode dominated by three-against-two rhythms leads into the main theme sparsely reiterated in the piano's extreme registers. Then passages consisting of building tremolos and more intense counterpoint alternate. Mitchell's agile fingers brilliantly dispatch episodes of rapid *détaché* writing that evoke the fourth part of Rzewski's *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, albeit in denser form.

'Wake Up' takes its cue from the Woody Guthrie song of the same name. Again, toccata-like patterns and trilled sequences go back and forth. Mitchell's creativity comes into imaginative play as he takes advantage of the composer's option to improvise a cadenza over a chord held by the sostenuto pedal. By contrast, *War Songs* (2008) is lighter and more aphoristic in style. Here Mitchell's nuanced precision differs from the sterner, gaunter impression of Rzewski's live performance from Valencia uploaded to **imslp.org**.

Rzewski describes the three pieces comprising *Winter Nights* (composed for Mitchell in 2015) as 'hard to get across to an audience, very introspective, and written in a kind of uncompromising polytonality that is distinctly against the prevailing fashion of easily consumed hard-driving optimism'. Actually, the harmonic language doesn't really differ from Rzewski's norm, while Mitchell's variegated sonority and long-lined projection certainly 'get across'.

Imagine a fantasy on the 'Dies irae' in the form of a muffled march and you'll get the gist of *Saints and Sinners* (2016), which stylistically relates to Rzewski's transformation of 'The Peat Bog Soldiers' in his 2016 piano cycle *Songs of Insurrection*'s opening piece. Percussive single-note strokes, runs in fifths and seemingly simple parallel triads dominate the topography. At times Rzewski appears to wind things down only to rev up his engines anew. Because Mitchell seamlessly blends his improvised cadenza into the composition's fabric, you'd naturally assume that the pianist is playing *echt* Rzewski at that point.

Symbolically, perhaps, Mitchell recorded this release at producer Marc-Henri Cykiert's Brussels studio The Right Place, playing the same idiosyncratic Steinway grand that the composer used for his recordings issued on 'Rzewski plays Rzewski' (Nonesuch). However, the real 'authenticity' ultimately rests within Mitchell's compelling, sympathetic and authoritative interpretations. **Jed Distler**

'Fantasie'

'Seven Composers, Seven Keyboards'

CPE Bach Fantasia, 'Freye Fantasie', Wq67 H300 **JS Bach** Fantasia and Fugue, 'Chromatic', BWV903 **Busoni** Fantasia in modo antico, Op 33*b* No 4 **Chopin** Fantasy, Op 49 **Mendelssohn** Fantasia, 'Sonate écossaise', Op 28 **Mozart** Fantasias – K396; K397 **Schnittke** Improvisation and Fugue

Alexander Melnikov *hpd/fps/pfs*

Harmonia Mundi (HMM90 2702 • 68')

Here's an aural equivalent of time-lapse photography, a quick tour of musical history from JS Bach (a point of reference throughout) to Schnittke, demonstrating changes not only in style but also in the sonorities and constraints of the keyboard instruments of the time. It could easily have turned gimmicky; and since all the works are fantasies, a genre that consciously abandons guard rails and encourages composers to break free, it could have lost focus, too. But not in the hands of Alexander Melnikov. Fully attentive to historical shifts in idiom and unusually adept at illuminating the personality of different instruments, he's also a quicksilver artist whose uncanny sense of phrasing responds to the moment-to-moment swerves of the music. He's a brilliant communicator: whether in the intense rhetoric of JS Bach's 'Chromatic' Fantasia or the pained grief that haunts CPE Bach's Fantasia, whether in the stately return to the past that flanks the faux-Baroque Busoni or the dissonant embrace of modernism that fuels the manic Schnittke, Melnikov not only relishes every twist in the musical landscape but makes us relish them as well. Our pleasure is magnified by the excellence of the engineering.

Unfortunately, the Graff piano chosen for the Mendelssohn has a dullish sound that blurs detail; and although we get striking pictures of the instruments, the

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Founded in 1845 by Franz Liszt, the festival in Beethoven's birthplace Bonn is one of the oldest and most renowned festivals in Germany. This year's edition is thematically dedicated to »life« with more than 70 concerts in Bonn and the region, and featuring artists such as the **Tonhalle Orchestra Zurich & Paavo Järvi, the Mahler Chamber Orchestra, Sasha Waltz, Pekka Kuusisto, Manchester Collective & Abel Selaocoe, Isata Kanneh-Mason, Christian Tetzlaff, Brooklyn Rider** and many more.

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otherwise excellent notes by Jean-Jacques Groleau say nothing about them. These are minor drawbacks, though. Certainly, anyone attracted to the concept should check out this recital – as well as a predecessor, a nearly chronological survey of eight fantasies vibrantly played on a modern grand by Pavel Gintov ('Piano Fantasies' on Navona, issued in October 2021). Several composers are duplicated but only one work, the Chopin – and Gintov offers a rare chance to hear the Sonata-Fantasy No 2 by Stravinsky's teacher Fedir Yakymenko. Both discs will knock you out. **Peter J Rabinowitz**

'Im Freien'

Bartók Out of Doors, Sz81 – No 4, The Night's Music **Draeseke** Petite histoire, Op 9 **Liszt** Études d'exécution transcendante, S139 – No 5, Feux follets; No 12, Chasse-neige **Ravel** Miroirs **Schulz-Evler** An die schönen, blauen Donau – concert arabesques **Schumann** Waldszenen, Op 82

Zlata Chochieva *pf*

Naïve (V7959 ② • 89')

Schumann's *Waldszenen* as a set rarely comes up for review. A shame, for these nine miniature tone poems – composed, be it noted, in an astonishing burst between Christmas Eve and New Year's Day 1848 – make an attractive alternative to the over-represented *Kinderszenen*. These *Forest Scenes*, with their dainty titles ('Lonely Flowers', 'Pleasant Landscape', 'Wayside Inn') were popular for many years. We even find Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray (1890) looking through their pages at the beginning of chapter two. Zlata Chochieva characterises each one to perfection but in one respect she earns particular praise. By far the best-known of the set is No 7, the strangely entitled 'Vogel als Prophet' ('The Bird as Prophet'), once a favourite encore and recorded by many great pianists. There are two different views of it: Cortot (1948) and Earl Wild (1987) offer twittering birdsong, while Paderewski (1926) and Myra Hess (1931) see it more as a wistful little meditation. Chochieva opts for the latter. Few of her peers, however, observe as acutely as she Schumann's very precise pedal markings, clearly intended as an important part of the composition but rarely followed.

Ravel's *Miroirs* continues the 'out of doors, back to nature' theme with its six (longer) tone poems, their titles more explicitly linked to their musical evocations and No 2, 'Oiseaux tristes', surely inspired by 'Vogel als Prophet'. Chochieva, stylistically convincing in Schumann, here could be taken for a different pianist, so completely does she inhabit Ravel's sound world. These are performances that compare favourably with Steven Osborne in his benchmark survey of the complete solo works (Hyperion, 4/11), Chochieva the more intimate of the two, and 'Alborada del gracioso' taken at an even brisker pace than the Scot.

Disc 2 begins with two of Liszt's most technically challenging *Transcendental Études* (tone poems in all but name). Both of them leap off the page in Chochieva's hands with fabulous left-hand articulation, tonal colouring and sheer pianistic relish. After experiencing the dancing lights of 'Feux follets' and a brutish snowstorm, Chochieva retreats indoors for the three movements of *Petite histoire* by Felix Draeseke. Piano buffs will be familiar with his concerto and sonata. These are pleasant enough Schumannesque 'morceaux caractéristiques' (as the title-page has it) entitled 'Rêve de bonheur', 'Intermezzo' and 'Incertitude'.

Then we come to the Schulz-Evler *Blue Danube* transcription. Here Chochieva, like every other pianist, has to bear comparison with Josef Lhevinne's incomparable (incredible?) 1928 recording. If this new account is your introduction to what is one of the best-loved (and most difficult to bring off) of all piano transcriptions, then you will not be disappointed. It is the dazzling tour de force it is intended to be and presented complete (Lhevinne omits the opening pages and makes several other substantial cuts). It is great to hear someone of Zlata Chochieva's generation resurrecting the piece. She does not, though, eclipse Lhevinne.

Like the Schumann and Ravel sets, Chochieva ends not with a bang but a whisper: 'The Night's Music', the fourth of Bartók's *Out of Doors*, a cycle of five tone poems from 1926 that gives this programme its title. Has there ever been a more eerie, unsettling depiction of rural nocturnal sounds? Altogether a terrific programme from a greatly gifted pianist. **Jeremy Nicholas**

'Meeting My Shadow'

Beethoven Variations and Fugue on an Original Theme, 'Eroica', Op 35 **Brahms** Three Piano Pieces, Op 117 **Messiaen** Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus – No 15, Le baiser de l'Enfant-Jésus **D Scarlatti** Keyboard Sonatas – Kk29; Kk487 **Scriabin** Piano Sonata No 9, 'Black Mass', Op 68. Waltz No 4, Op 38

Giorgi Gigashvili *pf*

Alpha (ALPHA930 • 73')

'I like to bring works composed in various epochs under one umbrella. I need to feel the connection between the works within a particular programme to make my interpretation more convincing.' That's how the young Georgian pianist Giorgi Gigashvili explains his debut solo CD's playlist. He also says that 'in my imagination, I related all the pieces I recorded to different kinds of love'.

To quote Tina Turner, what's love got to do with it? Furthermore, Gigashvili's quest for stylistic contrast and diversity results in heavy going and lopsided programme-building. Hearing the Beethoven *Eroica* Variations, Scriabin's Ninth Sonata, one of the longer Messiaen *Vingt Regards* and the Brahms Op 117 pieces at close proximity is like eating Chinese, Italian, French and Indian main courses in one sitting. The two Scarlatti sonatas aren't so much palate-cleansers as appetisers served to the over-sated, while Scriabin's tedious Op 38 Waltz concludes things on an anticlimactic note.

As such, it's best to consider each work and interpretation on its own terms. Gigashvili's Scarlatti is suave yet not scintillating; compare his seamless D major Kk29 to Wolfram Schmitt-Leonardy's charged dynamism (Piano Classics, 9/22) and you'll understand my point. In the *Eroica* Variations Gigashvili emphasises pianistic brilliance and paragraphic sweep in the manner of Sviatoslav Richter's early 1970s studio recording. As a result, he doesn't bring out the linear tension, tensile drive and caustic humour one hears from Clifford Curzon (Decca, 1/72), Cyprien Katsaris (Warner, 8/90) or Emanuel Ax's Sony remake (7/13). Var 2 is a telltale example of this, where Gigashvili glosses over the triplet figurations to the point where they are indistinguishable from the *presto* cadenza in regard to character. The pianist's ritards at cadence points sometimes undermine the composer's cumulative design, although his concluding fugue's stinging accents and super-supple double thirds will humble mere mortal pianists.

Gigashvili treads heavily in the slower-than-usual opening motif of Scriabin's

Asako Morikawa joins Richard Boothby on two tracks on a lively album of the music of Elizabethan composer Alfonso Ferrabosco – see review on page 67

Sonata No 9. His explosive trills are more 'excited' than exciting, because they overpower the left hand's anchoring rhythm: to hear the textural elements in perfect coruscating balance, go to Horowitz (Sony), Ashkenazy (Decca, 11/75) or Hamelin (Hyperion, 6/96). He sustains the Messiaen's opening pages beautifully, yet slightly holds back in the *presque vif* section, where the chordal build-up lacks the ardent ecstasy of Aimard (Teldec, 4/00), Osborne (Hyperion, 10/02) or Loriod (Erato, 4/89). The shapely animation throughout the first and third Intermezzos in Brahms's Op 117 brackets Gigashvili's pallid and prosaic reading of the second piece. And in the aforementioned Scriabin Waltz, he blurs that fine line between limpid and limp. In short, this gifted pianist is still a work-in-progress. **Jed Distler**

'Souvenirs d'oiseaux'

J Anderson Sensation **Debussy** Préludes, Book 1 – No 4, Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir **Grieg** Notturno, Op 54 No 4 **S Harrison** Lunae: Four Nocturnes **Jolas** Chanson d'approche **Messiaen** Catalogue d'oiseaux – Books 2-5
Roderick Chadwick *pf*
Divine Art (DDA21240 ② • 126')

Roderick Chadwick's 2020 recital 'La mer bleue', featuring the first book of *Catalogue d'oiseaux* alongside Szymanowski and David Gorton, set a notable marker for the pianist's credentials in Messiaen. These are amply consolidated in a follow-up that intersperses the next four books of the composer's piano masterpiece with music from previous and later generations.

Opening with 'Le traquet stapazin' is an astute move, this being the most accessible piece of the cycle with its lush evocation of a Mediterranean landscape. Chadwick renders it with due sensitivity, then is hardly less attuned to the nocturnal plangency of 'La chouette hulotte' and twilit remoteness of 'L'alouette-lulu'. Between these books, Sadie Harrison's *Lunae* explores aspects of the natural world via four nocturnes whose impressionistic take on music past and present reaches its climax in the fervent 'Of Stars and Nightingales'. Ending this first volume, the six pieces that comprise Julian Anderson's *Sensation* explore facets of musical time as these accrue intensity from the sparseness of 'She Hears' to the luminous textures of 'Alba'.

The second volume begins with 'Le rousserolle effarvatte', the centrepiece of Messiaen's cycle with the interplay between bird(s), place and time at its most resourceful and imaginative. In contrast comes the whimsical elegance of 'Alouette calandrelle' then the impetuous animation of 'La bouscarle', whose virtuosity Chadwick projects with unfailing assurance. He is no less inside the alluring poise of *Chanson d'approche*, a concert study in which Betsy Jolas channels birdsong along a more intuitive formal trajectory, exuding a more spontaneous expressive profile. Nor do the *Prélude* by Debussy and the Nocturne by Grieg sound at all anticlimactic in rounding off this sequence, especially when played with such fastidiousness and charm.

This release is enhanced by Chadwick's detailed notes, together with Messiaen's prefaces to each of his pieces. The only reservation concerns a recording that, while it lacks nothing in clarity, feels a little too enclosed fully to convey dynamic nuance and tonal resonance, but this is a minor blemish on an impressive achievement such as warrants urgent investigation. **Richard Whitehouse**

Dobrinka Tabakova

Having fought against pressures inherent in her field, she has an unwavering reverence for melody and clarity, says **Hattie Butterworth**

For several months I've had the numerous recordings of Dobrinka Tabakova's Nocturne for solo piano on repeat. She wrote it in her twenties, in 2008; and now perhaps considered 'in vogue', this style of solo piano work feels at home in panoramic drone footage of Norwegian fjords on YouTube. But I added it to a playlist I have named 'cry'. It ignites something deeply emotional within me, and, indeed, much of Tabakova's music engages with a rawness of human experience. Can we call it accessible? It's a term that appears to be used in criticism of contemporary music – 'accessible' is perhaps the antithesis of the richly encouraged 'academic'.

Tabakova tells me about the pressure, deeply embedded in her education, to discard or disguise melody and its roots: 'There was always an expectation of how your score should look in college. It had to have beams across bars and be visually really overwhelming. But that felt more like an exercise to me. I was striving to find the most direct route to expression and notation.'

'Without really knowing it, I was making some kind of a statement with "Praise", but it was simply what I wanted to write'

Born in Bulgaria in 1980, Tabakova moved to London at the age of 11 and began studies in piano and composition at the junior department of the Royal Academy of Music. Aged 14, she won the Jean-Frédéric Perrenoud prize and medal in Vienna for a violin-and-piano piece called *Prayer*, from which point she plots the start of a real composition trajectory. 'I spent most of my teenage years in libraries, practising the piano or composing, so to have that external recognition meant a lot.' Another achievement came in 2002, when her choral composition *Praise* won the Barclays Private Banking Prize for an anthem for the Queen's Golden Jubilee celebrations, and was performed at St Paul's Cathedral. The piece embraces the opulent acoustics of St Paul's and builds gently and powerfully, something that one might not immediately associate with a celebratory anthem. 'Without really knowing it, I was making some kind of a statement, but it was simply what I wanted to write,' she recalls.

Tabakova studied at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London, subsequently receiving a PhD in composition from King's College London. Among her teachers were Simon Bainbridge, Diana Burrell, Rob Keeley and Andrew Schultz, with other major influences being Xenakis, Alexander Goehr and John Adams. Speaking on BBC Radio 3's *Music Matters* earlier this year, Tabakova told Tom Service about her meeting with Xenakis at the Centre Acanthes in the south of France in her mid-teens.

A feeling of isolation while composing is offset by Tabakova's many collaborations

'Aesthetically, we are polar opposites – complexity goes against what I want in my scores. But when I met him he was incredibly generous. He looked at me and said, "Don't be afraid to be different."'

The difference came through Tabakova's unwavering reverence for melody and clarity. Earlier works focused on the piano and the influence of improvisation: *Modetudes* (1998) travels through the seven modal scales, while *Halo* (1999) explores the instrument's darkness and light, transmuting an experience of a halo of light forming around the moon. Other works such as *Frozen River Flows* (2005) for oboe and percussion and her string quartet *On a Bench in the Shade* (2004) take influence from natural imagery. In the quartet, there is a distinctive fight between instrumental parts that move in and out of comfort, between moments of almost folk-like melody and modality and those of restless dissonance.

Suite in Jazz Style (2008) for viola and piano was written for viola player Maxim Rysanov, with whom she had previously collaborated on the Bulgarian-influenced *Pirin* (2000) for solo viola and the Viola Concerto (2004). *Suite in Jazz Style* emulates different 'flavours' of the jazz repertory, the human-voice-like sound of the viola lending itself to the role of jazz singer and showcasing the range of Tabakova's musical inspirations while she remains grounded in her own sense of voice and idiolect.

The Cello Concerto also arrived in Tabakova's fiercely creative year of 2008, commissioned by the Amsterdam Cello Biennale and written for Latvian cellist Kristina Blaumane. Although the slow movement, 'Longing', often stands alone due to its popularity, Tabakova views the work as 'one seamless form', with continuous ideas transformed and explored throughout its 20-minute duration. Her debut portrait album, 'String Paths' (ECM), showcasing her music for strings, was nominated for a Grammy in 2013. It includes the Cello Concerto alongside *Suite in Old Style* (2006) for viola, harpsichord and strings, based on 18th-century courtly life, and *Such Different Paths* (2008) – her string septet

TABAKOVA FACTS

1980 Born in Plovdiv, Bulgaria
1991 Moves to UK
1995 *Prayer* wins Jean-Frédéric Perrenoud awards, Vienna
2001 Graduates BMus, Guildhall School of Music, followed in 2002 by MMus. Teachers include Simon Bainbridge, Diana Burrell, Andrew Schultz
2002 Anthem *Praise* wins Barclays Private Banking Prize – performed at St Paul's Cathedral
2003-07 PhD in composition at King's College London with George Benjamin, Rob Keeley, Silvina Milstein. 2004: Viola Concerto for Maxim Rysanov
2008 Cello Concerto, *Suite in Jazz Style*, *Such Different Paths*
2011 Awarded Sorel Medallion for Choral Composition, New York
2013 Debut portrait album, 'String Paths', released
2014-16 Orchestra of the Swan residency, includes choral work *Immortal Shakespeare* (2016)
2016-18 Truro Cathedral residency: *Truro Canticles* (2017), *Kynance Cove* (2018)
2017 Double piano concerto *Together Remember to Dance* for Arthur and Lucas Jussen and Amsterdam Sinfonietta. Begins five-year residency with BBC Concert Orchestra
2019 Choral profile album released with Truro Cathedral Choir, BBC Concert Orchestra
2019 *Timber and Steel* from *Earth Suite* premiered at Henry Wood Tribute, BBC Proms
2021 Violin concerto *The Patience of Trees* premiered at Manchester International Festival with Hugo Ticciati and Manchester Camerata
2022-23 Artist in Residence with the Hallé

exploring a journey through the blocks, registers and colours that build string chamber music.

The booklet notes for 'String Paths' describe 'the spirits of East and West coursing through the pieces, usually hand in hand'. Tabakova's Bulgarian heritage is something that remains central to her identity, both musically and personally. Despite not being drawn to the folk tradition of her native country as a child, she rediscovered it after moving to the UK, and there is a subtle thread of influence that runs through some of her work. A continued connection to Bulgaria looks to be part of her future, too, as her focus soon shifts to a commission for a *Lux aeterna* in honour of victims of communism. The work will have its premiere in December 2023 in Timisoara, Romania, alongside Requiem movements written by six other composers from former Eastern bloc countries.

Perhaps any sense of Britishness comes through Tabakova's engagement with the choral culture of the UK, within which she has found a distinctive voice and which has led to the most recent recording of her music: two works on The Sixteen's most recent album, 'A Watchful Gaze', demonstrate an inherent affinity for setting religious texts. 'It's a dialogue between you and something else … something bigger' – she explains the experience as one that can be difficult to translate, but a spirituality is present and strongly communicated in her settings. Her *Centuries of Meditations* for choir, harp and strings was premiered at the Three Choirs Festival in 2012 and selected by the PRS Foundation as one of the best pieces of British orchestral music from the past 25 years. The work celebrates the unique splendour of cathedrals, directly inspired by four stained-glass windows in Hereford Cathedral, with settings of texts by 17th-century poet and theologian Thomas Traherne.

'It can be lonely, just writing.' Tabakova's admission of this feeling of isolation explains her dedication to collaboration, with individuals, choirs and orchestras. Understanding the voice of an ensemble or soloist is an important part of the writing and commissioning process. An extended residency at Truro Cathedral resulted in her second profile album (a 2019 *Gramophone* Critic's Choice), this time focusing on her choral works, recorded at the cathedral with the BBC Concert Orchestra and cellist Natalie Clein. A residency in 2017-18 with Leipzig MDR RSO was followed by five dedicated years as resident composer with the BBC Concert Orchestra out of which larger-scale orchestral pieces arose, such as her extended project *Earth Suite* (2018-20), a triptych of orchestral pieces which work both separately and as a whole. The third piece, *Timber and Steel*, written second, was premiered at the BBC Proms in 2019 to mark 150 years since Sir Henry Wood's birth.

Writing is currently underpinned by Tabakova's residency with the Hallé for the 2022-23 season. This collaboration involves a commission for the Hallé Youth Orchestra and a focus on her chamber music, with performances including *Fantasy Homage to Schubert* (2013), and *Moreni* (2007), which again taps into natural influences, transmuting the muffled sounds of rivers flowing beneath the 'moraines' (ancient mountain stone formations). A recording to underline her Hallé collaboration is due to be released on the Hallé label in October. The repertoire features *Earth Suite* and *Orpheus' Comet* (2017), alongside the Cello Concerto with Guy Johnston and the Viola Concerto with Rysanov.

Working with young people in the Hallé especially has been an experience that gets to the heart of Tabakova's compositional process – to get inside an ensemble, understand its voice and write music that challenges it, not only technically but also musically and emotionally. What composition is and means is something complex and beguiling if you are, like me, not remotely creative with sound. But when Tabakova explains it to me it finally begins to make sense, because it is, for her, simultaneously personal and universal: 'It's a conversation within you between some of your fears or things that you're happy about in life. And it's sending out questions to a bigger universe and sharing them in this wonderful abstract world of sounds that vibrates.' G

LISTEN TO TABAKOVA

Small- and large-scale works showcase her collaborations

Arise Lord into thy rest. Turn our captivity
The Sixteen / Harry Christophers
Coro (4/23)
Tabakova's collaboration with The Sixteen celebrates Byrd's 400th anniversary through partner psalm settings to the well loved polyphonic works.

Alma redemptoris mater. Diptych. Jubilate Deo. Kynance Cove. Of a rose sing we. On the South Downs. Praise. Truro Canticles
Truro Cath Ch; BBC Concert Orch / Christopher Gray, et al
Regent (10/19)
Tabakova's choral music shines on this profile album featuring major works for choir and for choir and orchestra.

'String Paths'
Janine Jansen *vn* Kristina Blaumane *vc* et al; Lithuanian Chamber Orchestra / Maxim Rysanov *va*
ECM New Series (6/13)
A work that put Tabakova on the map was undoubtedly her Cello Concerto, which appears here alongside other works for strings, including the septet, *Such Different Paths*.

PHOTOGRAPHY: BENJAMIN EALOVEGA

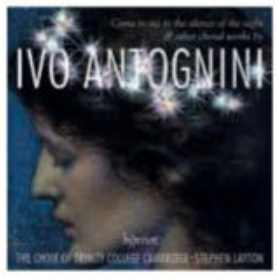
Vocal

Jeremy Dibble welcomes a new account of Stanford's Requiem:
'Brabbins brings out the luminosity of Stanford's orchestration, which is splendidly executed by the CBSO' ▶ REVIEW ON PAGE 81

Alexandra Coghlan finds deep meaning in Iestyn Davies's recital:
'It's deftly done – a reminder that transcendence, in music and life, is only ever temporary' ▶ REVIEW ON PAGE 82

Antognini

'Come to me in the silence of the night'
Alleluia. The Angel. Canticum novum. Come to me. Gloria in excelsis. Hope is the thing with feathers. Jubilate Deo. Laudate Dominum. Lux aeterna. O magnum mysterium. Regina caeli. Remembrance. Surge amica mea. Those tender words. Trinity Service
The Choir of Trinity College Cambridge / Stephen Layton
Hyperion (CDA68425 • 66' • T/t)



When it comes to choral music in Britain, are there more powerful kingmakers than Stephen Layton and The Choir of Trinity College Cambridge? Just look through the back catalogue of single-composer recitals: Paweł Łukaszewski (A/08); Ēriks Ešenvalds (3/15); Owain Park (A/18); Jaakko Mäntyjärvi (A/20) – names we all now know but who were (mostly) far from established in this country beforehand. So when a new recording – and a new name – drops, you pay attention.

Better known in the US, where he has had major performances at Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall, Swiss composer Ivo Antognini celebrates his 60th birthday this year. Early work in jazz, television and film all feeds into choral music that's immensely grateful and singable – written with real understanding of voices and of different kinds of ensembles (works here are written for everything from his wife's local church choir to Trinity itself), squeezing the greatest impact from whatever forces and ability are available. It's music that you want to sing, want to programme liturgically; I'm just not sure it's music you necessarily want to listen to for an unbroken hour. Antognini has a sweet tooth harmonically, has never met a suspension he didn't like, and the risk is that it all becomes a little undifferentiated.

There are, broadly, two modes: thick *divisi* radiance, heavy with low bass subwoofers (the very first chord of the disc vibrates up through your feet) and wide-spread clusters; and energised dance anthems, grooving with syncopation, that have 'choral competition sure-thing' written all over them. *Canticum novum* is the pick of the latter numbers – playful, insistently catchy and just a little bit Broadway. Of the former, the simple, four-part *O magnum mysterium* has a graceful sincerity about it, while *Surge amica* takes the excuse of its Song of Songs text to get sexy, smearing and smudging chords with reckless, generous depth.

Antognini favours Latin texts – and short ones at that. His *Alleluia* follows successfully in Randall Thompson's footsteps, making a properly attractive anthem from a single word. But the sense mostly – from both these and the English-texted secular pieces – is that the composer is better at a more generalised, melody-driven spirit than word-painting per se. Latin works best, as meaning doesn't obtrude too obviously. Emily Dickinson's 'little bird' in *Hope is the thing with feathers*, for example, emerges as surprisingly chunky and heavy of foot.

Trinity are on fine form: youthful, but firmly muscled and fearless, with Layton encouraging an open, fuller sound than the Oxbridge standard. They make their case for Antognini as a sugary part of the Anglican choral diet – just not the whole meal. **Alexandra Coghlan**

Byrd

'Byrd 1589'
Songs of Sundrie Natures
Alamire; Fretwork / David Skinner
Inventa (INV1011 ② • 123' • T)

Reviewing these ensembles' recording of Byrd's 1588 *Psalmes, Sonets, and Songs* (6/21), I wondered whether they intended to survey all of the composer's English-texted prints. Here's the answer, and it's mightily impressive. Their complete *Songs of Sundrie Natures* follows the composer's grouping into numbers of voices, beginning with three and thence on to four, five and six (though allowing some reordering within each group). Of the three-voice set, the first few set the opening verses of the seven penitential psalms, and the next five deal mostly with winged creatures, including Cupid. The sacred numbers are done with just voices, while the secular ones include instruments – an understandable distinction but probably not one to which Byrd's contemporaries would have adhered so rigidly. In any case, the four-, five- and six-voice sets are treated more flexibly.

The ensemble-singing here is first-rate and gets better as the set progresses; but whereas in the 1588 set the solo pieces were a mixed bag, here they are as consistent as the ensemble pieces, and the same might be said this time around of the instruments. 'The greedy hawk' sees soprano Rachel Haworth soar impressively to the top of her range at the end, but the ensemble really hit their stride with the four-voice 'Wounded I am', and the second disc is a string of bullseyes, poised, assured and habitually immaculate. The pace quickens for 'When I was otherwise than now I am', which is so rich contrapuntally that one would gladly have lingered a little over details. The dancelike 'I thought love had been a boy' is followed by 'O dear life', a setting of Philip Sidney that expresses the consort song economically at its most pure and lucid. All of which sets up the best-known piece of the set, 'From Virgin's womb'. The transitions from verse to chorus might have had more definition but the soloist's eloquence matches Byrd's here (I assume it is Martha MacLorinan, whose contributions to the previous set were so impressive); but *pace* Skinner, this is not the first recording to repeat the chorus after each verse, The Hilliard Ensemble having done so nearly 40 years ago (Erato, 6/88). Its companion, 'An earthly tree', though less well known, is scarcely less impressive, the two mezzo-sopranos

Gaétan Jarry conducts the Chorus and Orchestra of the Opéra Royal in coronation music by Handel and Purcell in the Royal Chapel of Versailles – see review overleaf

PHOTOGRAPHY: PASCAL LE MEE

keenly matched. The last few numbers are consummate: 'Behold how good a thing it is' has an exuberance that recalls Lassus, 'Unto the hills mine eyes I lift' is masterly in its counterpoint, and the finale, 'Christ rising again', closes the collection with one of its most memorable numbers, to which soloists, ensemble and instrumentalists all contribute (nowhere more so than in the lead-up to the 'Amen', whose syncopations show Byrd at his most exuberant, 'restored to life' indeed). One looks forward to hearing them all tackle this set's eponymous successor, published nearly a quarter of a century later. **Fabrice Fitch**

Dove

In Exile[a]. Night Song[b]
[a]**Simon Keenlyside** *bar* [ab]**Raphael Wallfisch** *vc*
[b]**Jonathan Dove** *pf* [a]**City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra / Gergely Madaras**
Lyrita (SRCD413 • 38' • T)
[a]Recorded live at Symphony Hall, Birmingham, December 8 & 9, 2021

In Exile was recorded live at Birmingham's Symphony Hall in December 2021 as part of the CBSO's centenary celebrations. The work, a setting of texts drawn from across the millennium by librettist Alasdair Middleton, is dedicated to Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, a survivor of Auschwitz, where, as she wrote in her autobiography, her skill as a cellist saved her life. So it's appropriate that her son, Raphael Wallfisch, is the cellist here, soulmate to Simon Keenlyside's baritone 'in exile', the two soloists representing one person. Wallfisch throws himself heart and soul into his music, never more affectingly than when reaching out as comforter to the exile, through the upper reaches of the cello. Keenlyside impresses too. I'm uncertain though that his declamatory, stentorian way with the words is the only approach to the text. As reproduced from Symphony Hall, his voice, recorded close to, rarely dips below *mezzo-forte*.

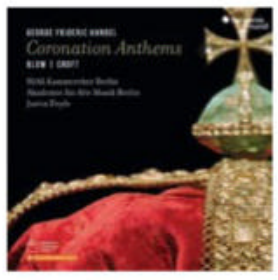
The grave and serious nature of the poems informs Dove's approach, but as one might expect from a composer who made in his name in opera, dramatic possibilities are taken too. The cello represents the taut bow in Dante's 'The first arrow the bow of exile will shoot', the orchestra the flight of the arrows. A glittering seascape dazzles the ear in 'See, Cold Island', the first stanza of a poem by Emily Lawless, the lines and setting redolent of Vaughan Williams's *A Sea Symphony*. Agitated *tutti* chords punctuate Khalil Gibran's poem 'If I were an ear of corn', the singer, the culpable onlooker, observing his pitiful fellow citizens from the comfort of exile. The blistering '99 Names of Exile' brings another disturbing scene as fractured and jagged orchestral fragments interrupt the narrative. Dove picks up on the poetic resonances in all his settings, finally coming through with another seascape, 'My grief on the sea', a luminous, sparingly scored lament painted by cello and strings, the anger gone, the exile at ease. It's a beautiful setting, tenderly rendered by baritone, cello and the CBSO with Gergely Madaras at the helm. *Night Song*, a touching codicil for cello and piano, echoes that note of calm sounded in the final poem. **Adrian Edwards**

Handel · Blow · Croft

Blow Chaconne in G **Croft** The Lord is a sun and a shield **Handel** Four Coronation Anthems, HWV258-261. An Occasional Oratorio, HWV62 – Overture
RIAS Chamber Choir, Berlin; Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin / Justin Doyle
Harmonia Mundi (HMM90 2708 • 59' • T)

Handel · Purcell

'The Crown – Coronation Anthems'
Handel Four Coronation Anthems, HWV258-261. Solomon, HWV67 – Praise the Lord! **Purcell** I was glad, Z19. My heart is inditing, Z30
Chorus and Orchestra of the Opéra Royal / Gaétan Jarry
Château de Versailles Spectacles (CVS110 • 60' • T)



Two albums of anthems written for the coronations of English kings, recorded in late 2022 for release on April 28, 2023? What can be going on? Ah, but of course! These are friendly gifts from abroad to mark the UK's big day, and gladly received they should be, too. There's no doubting where these two conductors see the historical centre of gravity lying as far as coronation music goes. While Charles III's coronation looks like being the most musically diverse ever, in the days of the Stuarts and Hanoverians they stuck more closely to what they were used to. Thus we get royal music from just three composers over these two releases: Purcell, Handel and William Croft.

The Croft comes in his anthem *The Lord is a sun and a shield*, written for the coronation of George I in 1714, which appears on the album by the RIAS-Kammerchor Berlin under their English conductor Justin Doyle with the Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin. A carefully written piece for choir, strings and trumpets, it represents, as well as anything might, a middle-point between Purcell's harmonic richness and flowing English word-setting, and Handel's crowd-pleasing power and regal grandeur, while yet having a dignified presence of its own. It is included in a programme that opens with the aristocratic Overture from Handel's *Occasional Oratorio* of 1746 (itself a bombastic celebration of monarchic survival following the ending of the Jacobite Rebellion), goes on to present an enjoyable and lively Chaconne for strings by John Blow, and climaxes in Handel's four great anthems for the 1727 coronation of George II. Doyle's manner has the stylistic confidence of the English choral tradition behind it. When put together with the customary excellence of the AAMB and a good amount of sensitive detail, there is not much more needed: the solemnity of 'Let justice and judgment be the preparation of thy seat' in *Let thy hand be strengthened* and a more than usually vigorous 'Thou hast prevented him' in *The King shall rejoice* are particularly well judged. But while any wearying sense of bombast is rightly averted, especially in the lightly joyful touch shown in the final sections of *Zadok the Priest* and *My heart is inditing*, there are times when the energy flags. The choir is recorded a little distantly, too, further contributing to the feeling of coolness in places.

This is not a criticism that can be levelled at Gaétan Jarry's jubilant offering with the Orchestra and Choir of the Opéra Royal. With similar-sized forces to Doyle's, they make a tremendous noise – *Zadok* is absolutely thunderous, its drumbeats sounding like cannons going off outside somewhere, and Handel's *My heart is inditing* (lit by glittering bursts from the grand organ) has an urgency few will have heard in it before. Not surprisingly in the Westminster Abbey-like acoustic of the Versailles Royal Chapel, a fair amount of detail is lost, but the emphasis in the choral singing here is in any case on long, smoothly shaped phrases and long-term ebb and flow, which can be quite involving, even if fugues (eg 'Thou hast prevented him') get rather mushy.

The programming pays a lightly atmospheric tribute to George II's coronation, inserting trumpet fanfares here and there, some appropriate vocal acclamations, and two Purcell anthems – *I was glad* and *My heart is inditing* – that were originally written for James II's coronation in 1685 but were revived in 1727. These, alas, are less fun: *I was glad* lacks spring in the opening section and remains dull and blunt-edged thereafter, while *My heart is inditing* is simply too fast and hectoring (even in the contemplative 'Hearken, O daughter' section), adds the distinctly French sound of recorders to the strings, and is anything but stately. The programme ends with a chorus of praise from Handel's *Solomon*, and why not? This may not be a subtle thing, but if a joyful clamour in a large building is what you want, well here it is. **Lindsay Kemp**

Ligeti

'Complete Works for a cappella Choir'
Az asszony és a katona (The Woman and the Soldier). Két Balassa Bálint-kórus (Two Choruses on Poems by Bálint Balassa). Betlehemi királyok (The Magi). Bujdosó (Wandering). Burját aratódal (Buriat Harvest Song). Choral. Chorlied nach Goethe. Dereng már a hajnal (The dawn's already rising). Éjszaka – Reggel (Night – Morning). Haj, ífjúság! (Youth). Hajnal (Dawn). Hortobágy. Húsvét (Easter). Idegen földön (Abroad). Inaktelki nóták (Songs from Inaktelke). Kállai kettős (Kálló Two-Step). Két Kánon (Two Canons). Lakodalmas (Wedding Dance). Négy Lakodalmi tánc (Four Wedding Dances). Lux aeterna. Magány (Solitude). Magos kősziklának (By the Huge Rock). Magyar etüdök nach Gedichten von Sándor Weöres (Hungarian Études after Poems by Sándor Weöres). Mátraszentimrei dalok (Songs from Mátraszentimre). Nagy idök (Great Times). Orbán. Pápainé (Widow Pápai). Drei Phantasien nach Friedrich Hölderlin. Tél (Winter). Temetés a tengeren (Burial at sea). A varró lányok (The Seamstresses)
SWR Vocal Ensemble / Yuval Weinberg
SWR Classic (SWR19128CD ② • 115' • T/t)

Tying in with the composer's centenary, this new double album of Ligeti's *a cappella* choral music vies with the classic London Sinfonietta Voices recording for the György Ligeti Edition. Performance-wise, there is little to separate the two; but in terms of recording quality, the SWR Vokalensemble disc has less live reverberation and closer miking, meaning that details of the polyphony are clearer. During his time in Hungary, at the Budapest Franz Liszt Music Academy, Ligeti was a member of different choirs, and his ease within the choral idiom is everywhere evident.

Most of the music is from before Ligeti's creative awakening in Cologne. *Songs from Mátraszentimre* sets rustic modal melodies into sophisticated counterpoint, blending familiar material with erudite craft, with lyrics mostly on folk themes ('I've got three barrels of wine, all three are on tap, they're sweet as honey', and so on). *Solitude* from 1946 shows hints of the later Ligeti in pedal notes against which an octatonic melody sounds, and major and minor second intervals featuring in the alto and soprano harmonies. Its mysterious sound world recalls Bartók's night music. The second of the *Two Canons*, a spoken-word declamation in nonsense verse, absurdist in tone, shows the roots of what would blossom in *Aventures*. The gradually accumulating counterpoint of *Éjszaka* ('Night') recalls Ockeghem, one of Ligeti's chief inspirations, with eight parts arranged in close canon eventually snapping into unison; it is suggestive of Ligeti's later micropolyphony.

Lux aeterna, commissioned by Clytus Gottwald's Schola Cantorum Stuttgart, is in 16 vocal parts and is familiar to everyone from *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The SWR Vokalensemble's atmospheric performance is sensitive to the minutiae of the dynamics, and the sound is bright and weighty.

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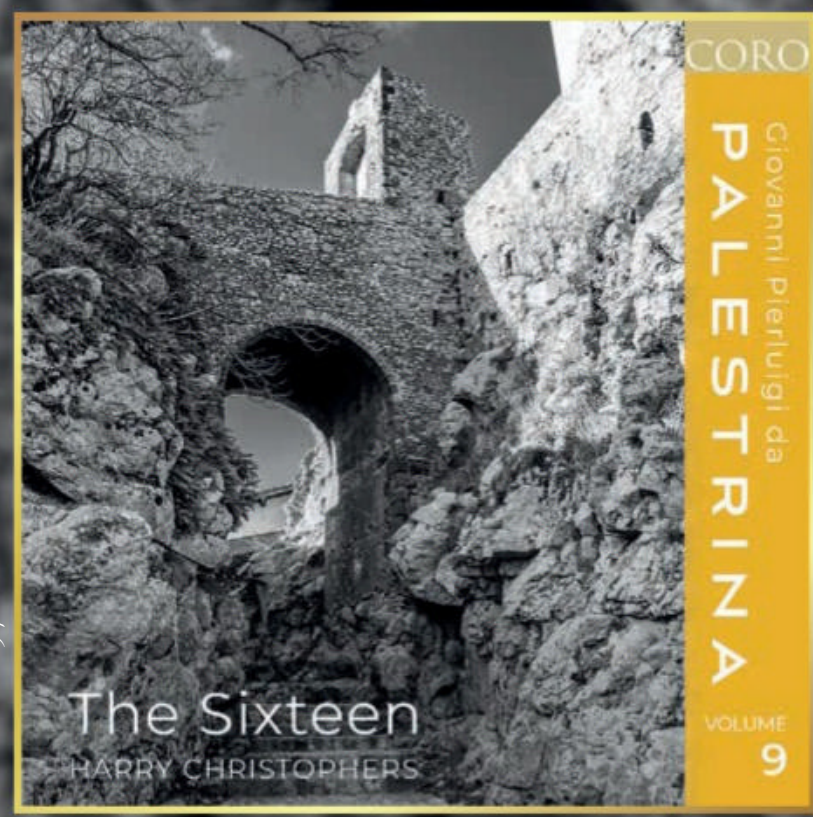

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Closing the album are the *Three Fantasies* based on Friedrich Hölderlin and the two *Hungarian Études*, both from Ligeti's last creative phase. For the latter, Ligeti returned to the poet Sándor Weöres with a fractured, delirious atonal vocabulary. Again, the world is that of the rural peasantry, now vividly conjured in canons run amok, spatially separated choral units, different tempos running concurrently – the hustle and bustle of daily life.

Liam Cagney

Choral Works – selected comparison:
London Sinfonietta Voices, Edwards
Sony Classical SK62305 (1/97)

Obrecht

Anonymous Maria zart **Obrecht** Missa Maria zart **Pfabinschswantz** Maria sart **Senfl** Maria, du bist Genaden voll/Maria zart
Cappella Pratensis / Stratton Bull
Challenge Classsics (CC72933 • 65' • T/t)

It was described by my colleague Fabrice Fitch as 'one of Renaissance music's hidden gems', but I think it's now true to say that this Mass is finally out in the open. This new release from Ensemble Pratensis is one of those rare, landmark albums that offers a striking alternative performance of a piece already afforded a major entry in the catalogue from The Tallis Scholars (Gimell, 3/96) as well as Beauty Farm (Fra Bernardo, 9/19) and the venerable Prague Madrigal Singers (Supraphon, 6/72). As such we now have a range of approaches to help us know better this extraordinary polyphonic behemoth.

Cappella Pratensis use lower male voices (the top line sung by countertenors, as with Beauty Farm) and Germanic pronunciation, and read from a specially commissioned choirbook that demands they stand in close formation. The result is a warm huddle of sound, more intimate than grand. Framing the Mass with the monophonic lied that forms the cantus firmus and two polyphonic settings further increases a sense of intimacy with this material before it is broken up by Obrecht into intriguing segments, which ebb and flow stylishly in this polished performance.

Obrecht's music is mesmeric, and as such it's fascinating to compare this with The Tallis Scholars, sounding so fresh and spacious but sepia-tinged due to Peter Phillip's unhurried tempos. What caught my ear three decades ago were the hypnotic repetitions on '[Kyrie] e-leison'. In this new performance, Stratton Bull directs more briskly yet still observes such lulling phrase shapes. In the opening of the *Sanctus* Capella Pratensis make their most attractive blend, and notable also are the 'in nomine Domini' passages of the *Benedictus*. This is clearly a well-honed performance, strongest in delicate moments.

The *Credo* has a more exciting energy, although 'Qui propter nos homines, et propter nostram salutem' skates along too impatiently for my liking, but I love the superb change of texture at 'et vitam venturi seculi' and it's here that the large-scale planning of this performance is most apparent. This new release is a happy marriage of musicality and musicology.

Edward Breen

F Scarlatti

Dixit Dominus. Mass
Armonico Consort / Christopher Monks
Signum (SIGCD740 • 54' • T/t)

We know very little of Francesco Scarlatti, whose reputation has always been overshadowed by those of his elder brother Alessandro and his nephew Domenico. He was born in Palermo in 1666 and was active, primarily as a violinist, in Naples after Alessandro's appointment as *maestro di cappella* to the court there in 1684, though in 1691 he returned to Palermo, where he seems to have been based for the next 25 or so years; in what capacity remains unclear. Attempts to establish himself in Vienna from 1715 proved unsuccessful and in 1719 he moved to London, and from there in 1733 to Dublin, where newspaper reports of the time tell us more about the breakdown of his second marriage than his musical life. He died in Ireland, probably in 1741, though again we don't know for certain.

The two works recorded by Christopher Monks and the Armonico Consort reveal him, however, to have been a choral composer of some stature. They date from his Palermo period, the Mass from 1702, *Dixit Dominus* a year later. He brought both scores with him to England: the manuscripts, which form the basis of Geoffrey Webber's edition used here, are housed in the Bodleian Library. The Mass is loftily ceremonial, *Dixit Dominus* more extrovert and florid, though Francesco's methodology is similar in each. Both are scored for 16 voices (four four-part choirs), often singing fantastically intricate counterpoint. In place of solos, however, he offers closely woven trios or quartets for similar voice types, working downwards from sopranos to basses in the Mass's *Gloria*, deploying them less formally in *Dixit Dominus*, though in both works the effect is strikingly novel. Solo violin and a piercingly high trumpet, meanwhile, provide obbligatos and dominate the instrumental textures.

As one might expect, the performances are strong, superbly shaped by Monks, and played and sung, one voice to a part, with great precision. The big, complex choruses sound exhilarating, though it's the ensembles that often carry the greater emotional and devotional weight. The tenors bring bags of panache to the exacting coloratura of 'Juravit Dominus' in the *Dixit Dominus*, while the sopranos, paired antiphonally, do beautiful things with the Mass's 'Gratias agimus tibi', arguably the work's high point. Both trumpet (Peter Mankarious) and violin (Kelly McCusker) solos are terrific. The reverberant if atmospheric recording, made in a church in Gospel Oak, north London, compensates for some loss of detail with a real sense of voices entwining and overlapping exultantly in a large, resonant space. It's most enjoyable and highly recommended. **Tim Ashley**

Schubert

'Elysium'
Abschied von der Erde, D829. An den Mond – D193; D259. An die Nachtigall, D497. Auf dem Wasser zu singen, D774. Du bist die Ruh, D776. Elysium, D584. Ganymed, D544. Gott im Frühlinge, D448. Die junge Nonne, D828. Der liebliche Stern, D861. Litanei auf das Fest Allerseelen, D343. Der Musensohn, D764. Nacht und Träume, D827. Schwestergruss, D762. Die Sterne, D939. Wiegenlied, D867
Carolyn Sampson *sop* **Joseph Middleton** *pf*
BIS (BIS2573 • 69' • T/t)

Carolyn Sampson and Joseph Middleton are recording so much these days that it's hard to find a new vocal disc without one, the other or both. 'Elysium: A Schubert Recital' showcases them in core repertoire in a programme themed around songs concerning the afterlife. Authority and intelligence are evident in song choices, sequencing and performance in this somewhat soft-spoken disc that's surely among their best.

The first song, 'Schwestergruss' (which depicts ghostly, benevolent apparitions) begins with the piano suggesting the slowish, muted tolling of a death bell.

A lofty Mass and an extrovert Dixit Dominus: Christopher Monks leads vibrant accounts of choral works by Francesco Scarlatti, music of the Italian high Baroque

From there, imagery from poets including Rückert, Schiller and Goethe is full of tears, rapture, dreams and nocturnal moon and stars. The final song, curiously, is a melodrama for speaker and piano titled 'Farewell to the Earth', adapted from Adolf von Pratobevera's play *Der Falke*, ending with the line 'every sorrow will smile gently, and joy will hold in its embrace of the pure, tranquil heart'.

One is surprised, even taken aback, by how familiar songs in the recital fall into line with the disc's overall theme. 'Auf dem Wasser zu singen' is performed with a special lilt in keeping with the poem's imagery of water and waves, but the closing twist has the poem's protagonist vanishing 'from the flux of time'. The recital isn't all heavenly: 'Die junge Nonne' talks of death as a respite from inner turmoil – conveyed by the piano-writing.

Close attention to words is particularly important in a programme where some songs earn a place at the table for their poetic content, such as 'An den Mond', D259, which has eight stanzas of good Goethe with modest, strophic music. 'An den Mond', D193, a completely different text and song, has first and last verses with more musical depth than one would expect from its early catalogue number, but is heard here in a version published two years before the composer's death. It's a find.

The theme imposes a particular viewpoint upon Sampson's interpretations. In contrast to Ernst Haefliger's attempts to flatten out the range of ideas in 'An den Mond', D193, into a more consistent manner (DG, 9/60), Sampson and Middleton meet each stanza on their own sometimes quirky terms, both here and in other songs in this collection. The literary content benefits, and the diversity of manner keeps an ethereal sameness from setting in over the disc as a whole. We're also reminded that the afterlife is full of alternative logic. Schubert's song 'Elysium', for one, has a bit of the playfulness one associates with the vision of heaven in Mahler's Symphony No 4.

On a more detailed level, Sampson effectively changes dynamics in parts of poems that look forward to or inhabit the afterlife. Sampson is at her best in the nocturnal 'Nacht und Träume', with a masterly balance of word articulation and legato line. Few singers so effectively build the tension of a song with a slow expansion of tone, especially in the sublime 'Du bist die Ruh'. It seems that the more she records, the better she gets.

David Patrick Stearns

Schubert

Schwanengesang, D957. Der Tod und das Mädchen, D531. Totengräbers Heimweh, D842. Der Wanderer, D489. Wehmut, D772

Andreas Bauer Kanabas *bass* **Daniel Heide** *pf*

AVI-Music (AVI8553516 • 71' • T)

Many artists have had lockdown projects, but few can have been as fundamental as Andreas Bauer Kanabas's. As the German bass explains in a booklet note, the period saw him reconnect with Daniel Heide, his old accompanist from university, who encouraged him to take a break from the operatic roles of Wagner and Verdi to tackle the more intimate world of Schubert's lieder.

The result is an unapologetically big and bold performance of *Schwanengesang*. And the collection is preceded by four other songs that very much set the tone: they feature lonely, loner protagonists, here imbued with even greater world-weary gravity by Bauer Kanabas's big, gravelly voice and the low, sometimes almost sepulchral keys he and his pianist have chosen.

PHOTOGRAPHY: PETER MARSH

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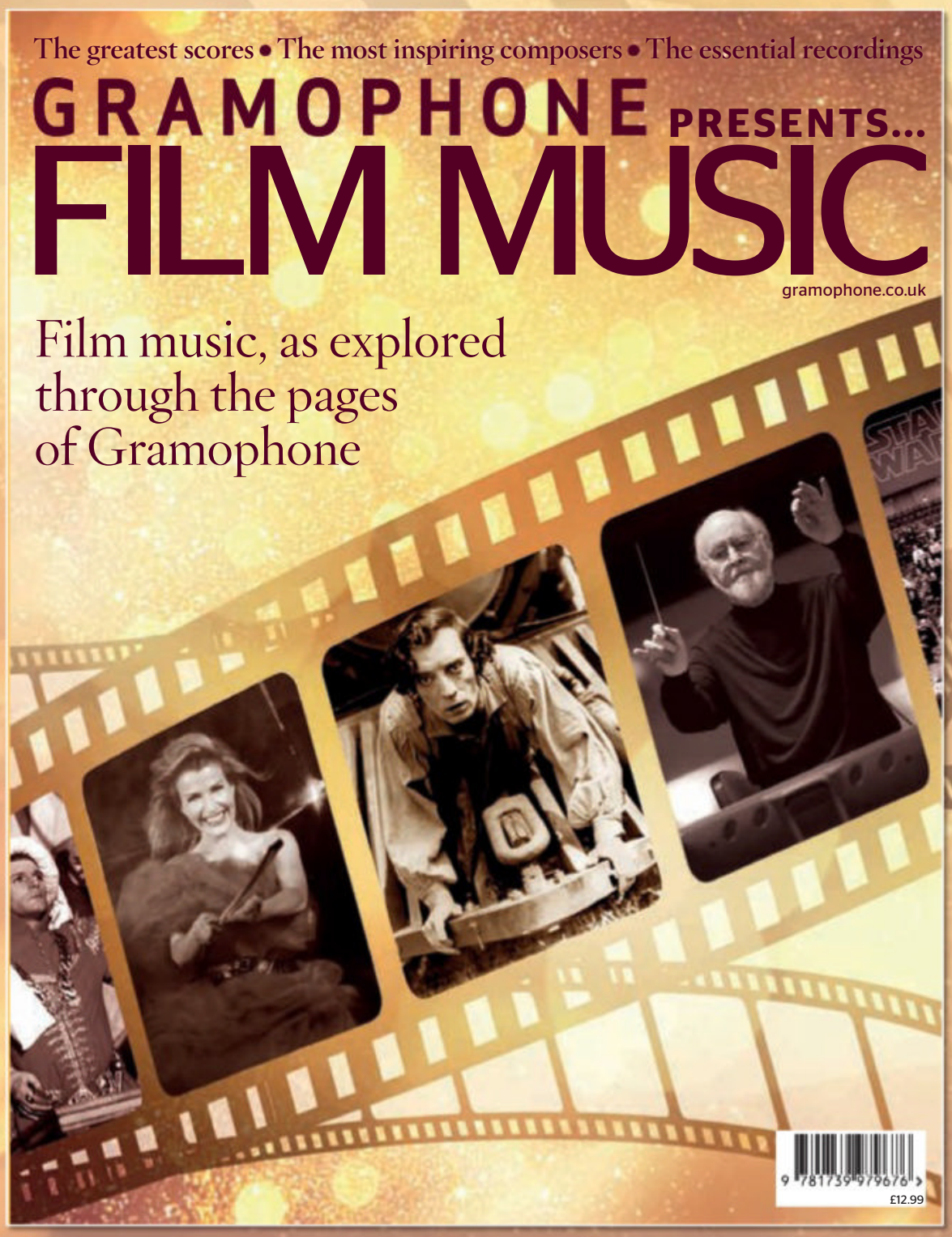

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These are in many ways straightforward readings, and the bass is interpretatively not that light on his feet – changes of mood are not matched by the shifts in colour one hears from other singers – but there's an integrity and honesty that's difficult to resist. And while I initially felt that the lighter numbers in *Schwanengesang* were short on alertness, the cumulative effect of the collection is mightily impressive.

There's much to enjoy in the Rellstab songs – a movingly turned 'Ständchen', for example – but as so often it's the Heine settings that make the most lasting impression, helped by the fact that Bauer Kanabas reorders them to have 'Ihr Bild' and 'Der Atlas' at the end of the group. With superbly atmospheric accompaniments from Heide, the bass creates a powerful mini-drama out of each. 'Am Meer', with the pianist's left hand diving deep into his instrument's lower register, has an especially grim power to it. In 'Der Doppelgänger' one really feels the singer addressing his ghostly double, and 'Der Atlas' has a brute force that leaves one shaken.

Others have given us *Schwanengesang* with more light and shade and vocal variety, but Bauer Kanabas's grand, imposing and moving approach is well worth hearing. Recommended. **Hugo Shirley**

Stanford

Requiem, Op 63

Carolyn Sampson *sop* **Marta Fontanals-Simmons** *mez* **James Way** *ten* **Ross Ramgobin** *bar* **University of Birmingham Voices; City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra / Martyn Brabbins**

Hyperion (CDA68418 • 74' • T/t)

While much of Stanford's large-scale music suffered increasing neglect after his death in 1924, his Requiem, commissioned for the Birmingham Festival in 1897, enjoyed a modest degree of attention during the rest of the 20th century. Boult performed it with the BBC Symphony Orchestra in 1944 and Boris Ord at Cambridge in 1952 during the centenary of Stanford's birth. During the 1970s it attracted the attention of Raymond Leppard, who believed (perhaps somewhat conjecturally) that the *Benedictus* influenced the nature of Elgar's 'Enigma' theme, though this speculative connection (which found its way into an article in *The Times* on August 20, 1977) was backed up by the fact that Elgar heard Stanford play through his work at Birchwood in 1897 before its first public performance. Since then the work has received a fair number of hearings, both here (I also heard a fine performance of the work by the York Musical Society under Philip Moore some years ago) and abroad.

Dedicated to the memory of Lord Leighton, a close friend, the Requiem emanated from Stanford's instincts for dramatic music. By 1897 he had completed five operas, the last of which, *Shamus O'Brien* (1896), had enjoyed immense success in London, on tours around the UK, on Broadway, in Chicago and in Sydney; and previous choral works such as *The Three Holy Children* (1885), *The Revenge* (1886), *Eden* (1891) and *The Voyage of Maeldune* (1892) had also shown a conspicuous predisposition for the theatrical. With the precedents of Requiems by Verdi (who knew Stanford's score and admired it) and Dvořák (also commissioned by Birmingham in 1891), not to mention Alfred Bruneau's Requiem (now much neglected), which The Bach Choir performed in 1895, Stanford was well placed to conceive the large-scale symphonic structure of his work and it was this aspect that caught the audience's imagination when it was first performed. The ambience of the operatic nature of the Requiem is further enhanced by the presence of four prominent soloists (Stanford was later to emulate this model in the *Te Deum*, Op 66, the *Stabat mater*, Op 96, and the *Mass Via Victrix*, Op 173) who, as 'characters' in the drama, all perform on this recording with a sense of authority and commitment. Indeed, the soloists are spoilt for choice when it comes to the rich solo material – the sizeable tripartite structure of the *Introit*, *Kyrie* and *Gradual*, the gripping multi-movement sequence of the *Dies irae* (which puts Dvořák's in the shade), the euphonious *Benedictus* and, for me, the most moving of all, the *Agnus Dei*, in which the closing 'Lux aeterna' is one of the composer's greatest creations (I often have a lump in my throat at this point when the tenor enters).

Brabbins, who truly understands the language of this music, judges the tempos and balance of the ensemble with instinctive sensitivity; his handling of the chorus – the University of Birmingham Voices – is outstanding, and he genuinely brings out the luminosity of Stanford's lustrous orchestration, which is splendidly executed by the CBSO, especially in the lovely solos of the *Dies irae*, the arresting climax of the 'Lacrimosa', the swirling *Rhinegold*-like figurations of the *Sanctus* and the solemn funeral cortege of the *Agnus* (perhaps a depiction of Leighton's funeral and interment at St Paul's Cathedral). The chorus sing throughout with a youthful clarity, beauty of tone and lovely intonation. However, if I had to pick out moments of particular deftness, they would be the simple but captivating homophony of the *Introit* and *Agnus*, the arresting opening of the 'Domine Jesu Christe' and the agility of the inventive fugue in the *Offertorium* ('Quam olim Abrahae'), the gossamer textures of the *Sanctus* (which is like Undine emerging from the lake) and the grandeur of the choral responses to the soloists in the 'Lux aeterna'.

In 1997 the Requiem was issued by Marco Polo in a recording with the RTÉ Philharmonic Choir and National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland under Colman Pearce. This was a most welcome recording at the time, but there is much more to learn about Stanford's choral masterpiece from the more cohesive architecture, sound and élan of this vibrant new issue from Hyperion. For anyone interested in British choral music of the period, it is a must! **Jeremy Dibble**

Comparative version:

Pearce *Naxos 8 555201/2 (7/97, 12/04)*

Willaert

'Adriano⁴'

Passio Domini nostri Jesu Christi secundum Joannem. Da pacem Domine. Ecce lignum crucis/Crux fidelis. Tristis est anima meum

Dionysos Now!

Evil Penguin (EPRC0054 • 61' • T)

If you visit the Palazzo Colonna in Rome to admire Annibale Carracci's remarkable *The Bean Eater*, along the same wall to its right there is Tintoretto's portrait of Adrian Willaert seated at a spinet with Venice in the background. The Flemish musician was *maestro di cappella* at St Mark's for 35 years (1527-62) but nowadays his works are published, performed and recorded less often than they deserve. Tenor and director Tore Tom Denys founded Dionysos Now! to bring Willaert's neglected output back to musical life. Three volumes have already been issued digitally and on abridged LP but the fourth instalment is the first to also appear on CD.

Passio Domini nostri Jesu Christi secundum Joannem has no solo Evangelist or any other roles such as in later Passions; everything is set polyphonically for the entire ensemble. It was formerly attributed to Cipriano de Rore, although Denys's short booklet note mentions vaguely that 'musicologists are now quite certain that it should be attributed to Willaert'. It would have been illuminating to read a somewhat

fuller commentary discussing precise sources, scholarship regarding authorship and the work's musical content. Another obstacle is the sung text of the Passion printed solely in Latin without translation. Recorded in the attractively reverberant yet transparent acoustic of the refectory of the City Museum in Ghent, Dionysos Now!'s seven male voices (one countertenor, three tenors and three basses) perform with expert awareness of contrapuntal details, textures and words. A breadth of colours and sonorities are executed with marvellous dynamic flexibility while always inhabiting the music's natural sphere.

The label Evil Penguin's dastardly machinations extend to omitting the texts of six Willaert motets. High-quality music-making is engrossing in *Tristis est anima mea* (manuscript part-books in the Royal College of Music), *Ecce lignum crucis* (Willaert's book of five-part motets, Venice, 1539) and *Da pacem Domine* (the mixed anthology *Ecclesiasticarum cantionum*, 1553). It is puzzling why three other motets – *Infelix ego* (1546), *Flete oculi* and *Dulces exuviae* (both from Willaert's revised second book of four-voice motets, 1545) – are exclusive to digital platforms: the CD has plenty of spare running time. Hopefully future volumes will achieve better consistency of content across all formats, as well as diligent booklets sharing lucid insights – factors that will help to fulfil the project's laudable goal to bring Willaert's music to wider appreciation. **David Vickers**

'Broken Branches'

Britten Songs from the Chinese **Caccini** Dalla porta d'oriente **Chaker** A Butterfly in New York **Darwish** El helwa di **Dowland** Time Stands Still **Fairuz** Li Beirut **Harvey** Sufi Dance **Monteverdi** La mia turca. Sì dolce è'l tormento **Takemitsu** In the Woods - Wainscot Pond **Traditional** Lamma bada yatathanna. La prima vez

Karim Sulayman *ten* **Sean Shibe** *gtr*

Pentatone (PTC5187 031 • 51' • T/t)

'Discomfort' is the unexpected emotion guitarist Sean Shibe singles out in his introduction to 'Broken Branches'. It was his discomfort and that of tenor Karim Sulayman – both artists whose heritage and lived experience spans the traditional divide of East and West – that was the driving force behind this singular collaboration.

The keystone of a programme that encompasses songs by Monteverdi, Caccini and Britten, music by 20th-century popular artists Sayed Darwish and Fairuz, contemporary works by Takemitsu and Layale Chaker as well as anonymous traditional melodies, is Jonathan Harvey's *Sufi Dance*. It's a piece, Shibe explains, that melts conventional arrangement into an approximation mediated by memory (or its failure) and personal experience. It posits an alternative to Orientalist appropriations, homages or fossilisations in Western art song that the whole album seeks to amplify and explore.

It's a thoughtful and idiosyncratic project, one carried through in several arrangements and realisations by the two musicians that blur the line between song and art song into something broadly 'folkish'. Shibe is articulate both as collaborator and soloist, his guitar nimble and glittering in the filigree ornamentation of Caccini's 'Dalla porta d'oriente' – Moorish metalwork in sound – haunting in the evocative harmonics and ghost-echoes and doublings of the Harvey and crooning in the Arab-Andalusian song-without-words 'Lamma bada yatathanna'.

Sulayman's flexible, light tenor is a pleasant enough instrument (and so it should be, with a Grammy Award behind him, for 'Songs of Orpheus' – Avie, 8/18). He's good at unaffected, folk-direct delivery – shown off best in Darwish's 'El helwa di' and Fairuz's 'Li Beirut'. But I found it hard to ignore the same 'paleness and shortness of sap and sweetness' that Hugo Shirley identified in his review of Sulayman's 'Where Only Stars Can Hear Us' (7/20).

This wan, sometimes floury tone is most exposed in a dangerously slow take on Dowland's 'Time Stands Still' and in Britten's *Songs from the Chinese*, where we miss contrast and clarity of mood. The vivid colours and lines Shibe draws from Takemitsu's solo 'Wainscot Pond' from *In the Woods* only call attention to the faded distance we get elsewhere, especially in Chaker's 'A Butterfly in New York', where a vocal line somewhere between chant and recitative should light up Sinan Antoon's text, not dull and recess it. It's a shame, because this highly personal project is full of interest, its big ideas just not quite fulfilled in performance. **Alexandra Coghlan**

'Divine Music'

'An English Songbook'

Adès The Exterminating Angel - Coffee-Spoon Cavatina. The Lover in Winter **Butterworth** Six Songs from 'A Shropshire Lad' **Croft** A Hymn on Divine Music (arr Britten) **Howells** King David **Muhly** New-Made Tongue. Old Bones. Four Traditional Songs **Purcell** Four Songs (arr Adès). I'll sail upon the Dogstar (arr Britten). Lord, what is man? (arr Britten)

Iestyn Davies *counterten* **Joseph Middleton** *pf*

Signum (SIGCD725 • 82' • T/t)

Divinity, Iestyn Davies muses in the booklet notes for his latest recital, is a term we use these days as much to describe beauty as sacredness. In a programme of English (emphasis on the 'ish' – there's lots of Nico Muhly here too) song, the countertenor and pianist Joseph Middleton explore the relationship between the two in music that teeters on the edge of transcendence – earthly or spiritual. It's a characterful, unusual programme, full of unexpected arrangements and premiere recordings – several commissioned by or created for Davies, including Nico Muhly's *Four Traditional Songs* and Richard III-inspired 'Old Bones', as well as the 'Coffee-Spoon Cavatina' from Thomas Adès's opera *The Exterminating Angel*.

The pairing of countertenor and piano sets everything slightly off-kilter from the start, a colliding of two different worlds that's mirrored in music in which the 17th and 21st centuries meet and commingle. The collision is a happy one, showing off Davies's flexible instrument and expressive range. With the recent loss of James Bowman it's a good moment to take stock and acknowledge just how far this next generation of countertenors have built on his legacy, developing both the repertoire and the perceived capacity of the voice-type itself.

It's lovely to hear Butterworth's *Shropshire Lad* songs in this pairing, a countertenor voice adding a wan fragility to 'Is my team ploughing?' and a wistful sense of perpetual youth and innocence to 'The lads in their hundreds'. Purcell songs are heard in Adès's telling, light-touch arrangements, the pristine melody of 'Evening Hymn' delicately smudged, its tidy vertical cutting against the endless horizon-lines of the accompaniment.

Muhly's *Traditional Songs* – occasionally rhapsodic, always ingenuous – make an elegant counterpart to Adès's aphoristic cycle *The Lover in Winter*, its vocal textures filed down to nothing against a chilly scatter of piano ice-crystals. 'Old Bones' makes something surprisingly sentimental from the discovery of Richard III's remains in a Leicester car park, an elegy that finds an echo in Howells's 'King David' – pristine and spare here, both Middleton and Davies trusting to the music's own beauty.

Adès's 'Coffee-Spoon Cavatina' is a witty postscript, sending us back from the brink

Seductive rhapsodies: Soprano Alexandra Lowe and pianist Patrick Milne present visions of the Orient in the Shéhérazade settings of Ravel and Koechlin

PHOTOGRAPHY: PATRICK ALLEN/OPERAOMNIA.CO.UK

of divinity to artful banality. It's deftly done – a reminder that transcendence, in music and life, is only ever temporary.

Alexandra Coghlan

'Le voyage'

Bizet Adieux de l'hôtesse Arabe. Vasco da Gama – Ouvre ton coeur **Debussy** Chansons de Bilitis **Koechlin** Shéhérazade, Op 84 – Le voyage; La chanson d'Ishak de Mossoul **Ravel** Chanson espagnole. Cinq Mélodies populaires grecques. Shéhérazade. Vocalise-étude en forme de habanera **Viardot** Les filles de Cadix. Madrid

Alexandra Lowe *sop* **Patrick Milne** *pf*

Champs Hill (CHRCD169 • 59' • T/t)

Anything as widely recorded as Ravel's *Shéhérazade* and *Cinq Mélodies populaires grecques* needs to arrive in distinguished form to catch one's ear – and this disc does so in unexpected ways. The repertoire has Ravel's three *Shéhérazade* songs from 1902 in close proximity to two selections from Koechlin's 1922-23 deeper dive into the same collection of Tristan Klingsor poems, with 13 songs published under Op 56 and Op 84. Initially, the lack of any complete recording of the Koechlin songs – whose texts are seductive rhapsodies often projecting an imaginary vision of the Orient – seems criminal. But the two songs heard here (one of them, 'Le voyage', is also on Sabine Devieilhe's 'Mirages' album – Erato, 12/17) have challenging vocal lines and a sense of meaning that is held just out of reach. Though 'La chanson d'Ishak de Mossoul' intriguingly veers between mystery, longing and atonality, even Alexandra Lowe's probing performance didn't pique my curiosity about Koechlin's other songs.

The Koechlin comparison, however, gives a new perspective on Ravel's *Shéhérazade*. The contrast with Koechlin's lack of conventional forms shows how Ravel used form as the primary expressive element. In 'Asie', the poem's incantatory repetition syncs with the composer's way of developing themes from a series of three discrete statements that continuously build on each other. In other *Shéhérazade* poems, Ravel's contemplative sense of stasis beautifully conveys the emotional content without the distraction of many exterior details, just as Monet's paintings blur form to reveal content. Elsewhere in the recital, Ravel's Greek songs are sung in Greek rather than French (maybe not as authentically as by mezzo-soprano Irma Kolassi – 9/52, now on Eloquence – but close enough), plus sprinkles of lesser-known Bizet and some wonderfully lively Viardot, all worth getting to know.

For all her linguistic adeptness, Spanish-born British soprano Lowe is a tone-based singer who knows how to use vocal colour as an imaginative vehicle of expression. Her best moment is in Ravel's *Vocalise-étude en forme de habanera*, in which she projects a wide, imaginative emotional range in a vocalise that's literally beyond words. This strength is also an important component in the success of Debussy's *Chansons de Bilitis*. Elsewhere, though, one fears that her voice doesn't yet have the technique to fully realise how she envisions a song. Bizet's 'Adieux de l'hôtesse Arabe' has some vocal labour, forced tone and loud passages that jump out of nowhere – amid phrases so emotionally apt that you're sure this is a great recitalist in the making. Pianist Patrick Milne (who is also a conductor) is a significant discovery. He makes you forget that you ever heard the orchestral version of Ravel's *Shéhérazade*, so deftly does he focus on the essence of any given passage and find its deepest meaning.

David Patrick Stearns

ONLINE CONCERTS & EVENTS

Andrew Mellor explores a range of performances from around Europe

Finns on scintillating form

Here's an occasion on which British readers might be grateful for not understanding Finnish. The Nordic nation's public broadcaster YLE transmitted a live concert from its symphony orchestra on TV in March, consisting of Ravel's complete *Daphnis et Chloé*, Ligeti's *Lontano* and the European premiere of Kaija Saariaho's orchestration of her own *Saarikoski Songs*. As usual, the interval was filled with rigorous discussion and analysis, complete with an update on the sorry state of the BBC ensembles that at the time faced cuts and worse. It came from Miikka Maunula, the YLE executive who spearheaded a massive increase in classical music on Finnish television a decade ago.

Not only is the full-strength **Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra** on scintillating form but unlike any BBC ensemble it gets to broadcast on TV on a weekly basis, mostly live. Those broadcasts can be accessed from inside Europe (even Britain) via YLE's catch-up player Areena. As chief conductor of the BBC Symphony Orchestra, Sakari Oramo knows all about the contrasting situation at his London orchestra. Here he returned to his erstwhile FRSO, joined by his wife Anu Komsi for the Saariaho (she gave the premiere of the orchestrated songs with the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Andris Nelsons in 2022).

Komsi was the impetus behind the initial cycle, for soprano and piano, written 2007-13. It sets words by the Finnish post-war poet Pentti Saarikoski, known for his distinctly modern use of the vernacular – specifically from his 1973 collection *Alue* ('The District'). The songs appear as unrelated, almost impressionistic fragments. Komsi's performance of them is one of the finest from her I have seen or heard, in technical and communicative terms. Her strength of tone is striking, the way she leans into the moaning glissandos, ploughs through the lyricism and dispatches a tight, almost avian vibrato effect. She is in total control despite the dramatic fear in her eyes. Oramo holds the dirty chord that ends the second song in the air with clawed hands, poised like a bear.

The cycle ends in loneliness but there's warmth and coital celebration aplenty to follow: a sexy, slippery, lustrous performance of the Ravel. Sound and fury from orchestra and choir (Musiikkitalo Chorus) are punctuated by finely calibrated flute solos from Kaisa Kortelainen and all-round brilliance from the clarinets. The piece boils to a thrilling climax. I'm not sure any broadcaster can match YLE for the way these concerts are presented, from the studio-like atmosphere of the Musiikkitalo to interval content, camera angles and the feeling of a live event.

> I'm not sure any broadcaster can match YLE for the way these concerts are presented with the feeling of a live event

The opening work in Helsinki is Ligeti's *Lontano*, also performed by the **Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra** and Daniel Harding as part of a beguiling programme of liquid landscapes posted on the Digital Concert Hall from a concert in February. I'd say Harding's performance has the edge over Oramo's for sustained tension. Opening in Berlin is Sibelius's *The Oceanides* (is it just me or does Ligeti quote Sibelius in *Lontano*?) in a performance that doesn't terrify quite like this piece can while betraying an occasional hesitance. As does an account of Britten's *Four Sea Interludes* with an unsteady 'Moonlight' and a 'Storm' that doesn't really frame its own chaos, if that makes sense.

But this is the Berlin Phil, and most of the music-making is hard to resist. Sometimes the power of an orchestra is best measured at the quietest of volumes. Here the slumbering brass and determined sweep of brushes on piano strings in Ligeti's *Atmosphères* suggest that there is a fine performance of Debussy's *La mer* to come.

And fine it certainly is. Here are ocean pictures that have as much high definition as sea spray – the picture sharpening momentarily from a context of deep nuance. What endless variance of colour the Berlin brass have at their disposal. The climaxes of the first two pictures have verve, a quality just as present in the sort of strong rhythmic underpinning this orchestra does particularly well. You'd swear you were hearing human voices, not tremolo strings, just before the 22-minute mark. The end of the piece blazes as incandescently as Oramo's Helsinki Ravel. Harding seems so at ease with himself and his technique these days, as if he's graduated from a conductor who shoots to score – and sometimes misses – to one who thinks less about results and more about appreciating the moment.

In the Swedish capital, where Harding leads the radio orchestra, the **Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra** (another ensemble formerly led by Sakari Oramo) continues to stream concerts. For her debut with the orchestra, conductor Speranza Scappucci devised another unusual programme that upended convention by ending with a serial concert-opener, Strauss's *Don Juan* (remarkably, heard for the first time in concert at this 97-year-old hall). It's an attractively jumpy, lyrical performance of the Strauss from a conductor who is clearly used to working in opera pits. Perhaps it shows that Scappucci is debuting; her eyes tend to be down in the score or up in the heavens.

Konserthuset Play's production values are a touch more basic than YLE's, with static (but robotic) camera positions, although you get the benefit of fluent interval interviews in English. That's where Scappucci makes the case for

Sakari Oramo and his wife the soprano Anu Komsi perform Saariaho on Finnish television

Barcarole by her compatriot Paola Prestini, an atmospheric night piece based on the Neruda poem of the same name, which is good to hear once. It's also where conductor, presenter Tony Lundman and violinist James Ehnes engage in an interesting discussion of the work that opens the concert: Elgar's Violin Concerto.

The RSPO's history with Elgar (they recorded plenty under Oramo) shows particularly in the teary, whispering tone they find for the concerto's slow movement. But it's heard just as much in the orchestra's willingness to give this music a hard, biting edge, which it can most certainly take. Ehnes is particularly impressive in the middle and lower range of the instrument, playing his fiddle like a viola. That unmistakable Elgarian coming together of threads is nicely caught in the finale.

We learnt recently that **Stephen Layton** will leave Trinity College, Cambridge, this summer after 17 years in charge of the chapel choir. That means we have limited time left to log on to YouTube and witness Layton conducting his choir like no other musician between choir stalls.

Or not conducting it. There is a sure confidence to this choir, which routinely sings psalms, hymns and antiphons with no conductor at all and which has the surest imaginable idea of its own sound. It is a large ensemble that spreads itself across six rows of stalls, and whose organ scholars hold no fear of the camera that is trained on them in the loft. Special mention should go to one of them, Jonathan Lee, who appears to have a liking for 20th-century French organ music and plays it with distinction, his light fingers finding extreme gravitas in it. What a technique he has. His rendition of Messiaen's 'Joie et clarté' (from *Les corps glorieux*), played as part of the mini-recital before Evensong on March 12, is wondrous even on an organ conceived for other sounds. High points of the service that follows include Leighton's *Magdalene College Service*, given the sort of high definition that Harding brought to his Berlin *La mer*, and an extraordinary sermon from Malcolm Guite, who commands the assembled undergraduates not avoid conformity at all costs before the choir scrunches into the non-conformist chord that opens Bach's *Herzliebster Jesu*.

But back to Layton. I generally prefer my Howells from other choirs where it has that bit more edge and ferocity, but there's something irresistible about seeing Trinity's boss conduct the composer's *Te Deum* from the *Collegium Regale* set at the Commemoration of Benefactors service on March 17 (one occasion on which Layton does conduct the psalms). His spreadeagling gestures at 'in the glory of the Father' and 'let me never be confounded' are those of a maestro, while the address that follows is pretty priceless too – this from the only such institution on whose webcasts words are invariably as idiosyncratic as music. The phrase 'hard act to follow' is overused, but it's difficult to imagine this choir retaining its combination of detail, blend and bravado under anyone else. G

THE EVENTS

Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra / Sakari Oramo areena.yle.fi
Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra / Daniel Harding digitalconcerthall.com
Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra / Scappucci konserthuset.se
Trinity College Choir / Layton youtube.com

Opera

Andrew Mellor greets an operatic comedy from Nino Rota:

'The opera shows Rota's ability to capture fleeting tenderness amid all the high jinks'

▶ REVIEW ON PAGE 88

Mark Seow enjoys a recital from countertenor Nicolò Balducci:

'His crystalline timbre is satisfyingly shaped into unrippled streams of vibrato-less legato'

▶ REVIEW ON PAGE 89

Cavalieri

Rappresentatione di Anima, et di Corpo

Anett Fritsch *sop*.....Anima
Daniel Schmutzhard *bar*.....Corpo
Georg Nigl *bar*.....Tempo/Mondo/Anima dannata
Cyril Auvity *ten*.....Intelletto
Florian Boesch *bass-bar*.....Consiglio
Margherita Maria Sala *contr*.....Piacere
Michal Marhold *bar* **Matúš Šimko** *ten*.....Compagni di Piacere
Carlo Vistoli *counterten*.....Angelo custode
Giuseppina Bridelli *mez*....Vita mondana/Anima beata
Arnold Schoenberg Choir; Il Giardino Armonico / Giovanni Antonini
Stage director **Robert Carsen**
Video directors **Paul & Peter Landsmann**
Naxos (2 110750 DVD; NBD0161V Blu-ray • 101' • s)
Recorded live at the Theater an der Wien, Vienna. September 2021
Includes synopsis

Pipping Peri's *Euridice* to the post by a full eight months, Emilio de' Cavalieri's *Rappresentatione di Anima, et di Corpo* (1600) is, to quote director Robert Carsen, 'the first conscious attempt to tell a whole story in words set to music'. But if *Rappresentatione*'s chronology is unambiguous, it's about the only thing that is. Sitting right in the groove between sacred meditation and secular entertainment, it's closest perhaps to unfashionable forms like masque – a tricky beast to bring successfully to the stage.

Carsen tackles it head-on in his 2021 staging for the Theater an der Wien. There's no getting away from the piece's moralising narrative, which sees Soul and Body torn between the guidance of Time, Reason and Counsel and the temptations of Pleasure, World and Life, and Carsen embraces the abstraction. The chorus (the Arnold Schoenberg Choir), all jeans and business-casual, gather as if in a departure lounge, clutching their suitcases. Life, as Carsen's newly rewritten Prologue tells us, is a waiting room, where all must remain until they choose their path.

That path takes them, in Carsen and Luis Carvalho's spare designs, through sombre religious ritual and worldly pomp, down to hell and up – almost – to heaven. Dancers and chorus largely take the place of sets. This is a human drama played out like a living Bosch canvas, striking stage pictures giving us the simplicity of naked souls suspended in mid-air, the gilded vulgarity of Mondo's earthly court.

The musicians of Giovanni Antonini's Il Giardino Armonico festoon this dark, stark, often monochrome staging with bold sweeps and slashes of colour. From belching dulcian and bright cornetto to the arid snap and crunch of gamba and lirone, it's a glorious shifting set of shades and textures, and the continuo-playing is often surprising and always virtuoso.

It's a shame, then, that the balance and sound quality on the DVD are less than ideal. The pit booms while the singers seem distant, recessed, with a fair bit of ambient sound cluttering the mix. It makes it harder to get a grip on Carsen's characters, locking them into arm's-length archetypes. Anett Fritsch is a bright-toned, bright-eyed Anima, Daniel Schmutzhard's Corpo the good-time guy ready to give it all up and follow her lead. Georg Nigl (Mondo) and Giuseppina Bridelli (Vita mondana) have a lot of fun among the damned, balanced by Florian Boesch (an authoritative Consiglio) and Cyril Auvity (Intelletto), tone occasionally bleating and uneasy.

Remaking the morality play for an immoral age, this *Rappresentatione* is as entertaining a sermon as you're ever likely to see. Does it belong in the opera house? Carsen certainly makes a persuasive case.

Alexandra Coghlan

Giordano

Siberia

Ambur Braid *sop*.....Stephana
Alexander Mikhailov *ten*.....Vassili
Scott Hendricks *bar*.....Gleby
Fredrika Brillembourg *mez*.....Nikona
Omer Kobiljak *ten*.....Prince Alexis
Unnsteinn Árnason *bass*.....Walinoff/Governor
Clarry Bartha *sop*.....Fanciulla/Old Woman
Manuel Günther *ten*.....Ivan/Cossack
Michael Mrosek *bar*.....Miskinsky/Disabled Man
Stanislav Vorobyov *bass*.....Captain/Guard
Prague Philharmonic Choir; Vienna Symphony Orchestra / Valentin Uryupin
Stage director **Vasily Barkhatov**
Video director **Tiziano Mancini**
C Major Entertainment (762908 DVD; 763004 Blu-ray • 112' • s)
Recorded live at the Bregenz Festival, 2022
Includes synopsis

There has been a resurgence of interest in *Siberia* of late as this is the second DVD of Giordano's 1903 opera to appear in just over a year. Filmed at last year's Bregenz Festival, the newcomer, directed by Vasily Barkhatov and conducted by Valentin Uryupin, is somewhat different from its predecessor, the Roberto Andò/Gianandrea Noseda production from Florence in 2021. Like the latter, however, it is hampered by an overarching theatrical concept that blunts its impact.

The tone here is unquestionably darker, for while Andò relocates the opera to Rome's Cinecittà studios, where a neo-realist *Dr Zhivago*-style costume drama is being filmed, Barkhatov frames it with the tale of an elderly émigré (Clarry Bartha) returning to Russia after the fall of Communism (video projections tell us we are in 1992) both to research her family history and to scatter her late brother's ashes on the site of the prison camp where both were born. The opera's narrative consequently consists of her discoveries as we watch past history enacted in period dress on sets depicting the post-Soviet present. The St Petersburg apartment where Omer Kobiljak's Alexis has installed Ambur Braid's Stephana as his mistress materialises in a grey, dilapidated building that looks like some now disused ministry, while the border post, where Braid voluntarily joins Alexander Mikhailov's

Human drama played out like a living Bosch canvas: Emilio de' Cavalieri's morality play of 1600 is presented in a vivid staging by director Robert Carsen

PHOTOGRAPHY: WERNER KMETITSCH

Vassili in exile, has become a federal archive piled high with files and documents. Where the camp once stood, meanwhile, we find a soulless housing estate surrounding a deserted children's playground.

The opera itself, however, has been twisted to fit the concept, as in order to create Bartha's previously non-existent character of the Old Woman, she is allocated vocal lines from elsewhere in the score, not only those of the now absent Girl, searching for her father among the prisoners, but also some of the music intended for the maid Nikona and indeed for Stephana herself. You can either cope with this or you can't, but Stephana's death scene is hopelessly weakened when some of her most moving lines are taken by someone else.

The performance has its strong points. Braid has a big, voluptuous voice and the intensity of her singing proves compelling, in both her fierily sensual declarations to Vassili and the scorn with which she rounds on Gleby, once her pimp, later her tormentor, played by Scott Hendricks with occasionally fraying tone, though he's a fine actor who admirably captures the man's repellent opportunism. I'd much rather have Mikhailov's lyrical, ardent Vassili to Noseda's Giorgi Sturua, who is apt to belt in places. Bartha acts touchingly, though the sound is metallic, her upper registers effortful, none of which makes the changes to the score persuasive. Uryupin is less subtle, more heart-on-sleeve than Noseda, which means passions run high in the climactic set pieces, though we lose some detail elsewhere. Playing and choral singing are superb. Noseda's performance is ultimately preferable, though both DVDs, alas, are far from perfect.

Tim Ashley

Selected comparison:

Noseda *Dynamic DVD 37928; Blu-ray 57928 (5/22)*

Rossini

L'italiana in Algeri

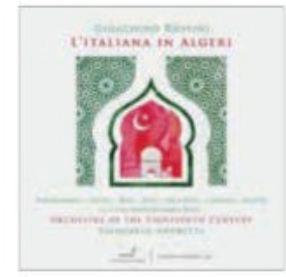
Ricardo Seguel *bass-bar* ..... Mustafà
Lilian Farahani *sop* ..... Elvira
Esther Kuiper *mez* ..... Zulma
José Coca Loza *bass* ..... Haly
Alasdair Kent *ten* ..... Lindoro
Vasilisa Berzhanskaya *mez* ..... Isabella
Pablo Ruiz *bar* ..... Taddeo

La Cetra Vocal Ensemble, Basel; Orchestra of the 18th Century / Giancarlo Andretta

Glossa (GCD921132 ② • 134')

Recorded live at the Concertgebouw, Amsterdam, February 19, 2022

Includes synopsis, libretto and translation



It's possible that in future times this set will be something of a collector's item, thanks to the Isabella of its 29-year-old Russian mezzo, Vasilisa Berzhanskaya.

Conchita Supervia, the unforgettable Spanish mezzo, was the first fabled interpreter of the role on record, remembered for her 1927 Barcelona recordings of four of Isabella's finest scenes (Parlophone, 9/57 – nla). More recently, it was Cecilia Bartoli who astonished us with her late-career debut as Isabella in a memorable staging by Moshe Leiser and Patrice Caurier at Salzburg's Whitsun and summer festivals in 2018 (Unitel DVD, A/19). And now we have Berzhanskaya, possibly the finest of all Isabellas on record: less idiosyncratic than Supervia or Marilyn Horne (Erato, 8/88 – nla) yet the equal of both in her own particular marriage of a finely honed *bel canto* technique and a keen sense of theatre.

Sadly, the set itself is little more than a memento of what was clearly an enjoyable afternoon in the Amsterdam Concertgebouw the day after Covid

restrictions were lifted in February 2022. In earlier times, the performance would have ended up on a pirated disc, treasured by Berzhanskaya completists, while the rest of us luxuriated in some expensively produced studio recording with a cast and conductor worthy of both the opera and our newest Isabella.

What we have here, unfortunately, is a cast of mainly up-and-coming singers, several of whom should either not be singing Rossini or doing so under better tutelage. Take the Chilean bass-baritone Ricardo Seguel, who plays the hapless philanderer Mustafà, the Bey of Algiers. He has a fine vocal presence and runs well on even ground but he's defeated by elaboration: those *fioriture* that are part and parcel of Rossini's early *bel canto* writing.

As to the numerous lapses in taste and style of the Lindoro, emergent *tenore di grazia* Alasdair Kent, I partly blame the conductor, Giancarlo Andretta, who should have better advised him and better reined him in. The Taddeo, Pablo Ruiz, is excellent in 'Ai capricci', the famous duet with Isabella, but his great Act 2 scene of fear and bewilderment after his investiture into the bogus order of 'Kaimakan' is pretty well wrecked by Andretta's unhelpfully fast tempo. (Rossini's marking is a plain *Allegro* throughout.) In the final analysis, the set's principal problem is erratic conducting, made worse by the bass-heavy sound and occasionally indifferent playing of a period-instrument orchestra that's being required to perform early Rossini in too large a hall.

Happily, anyone looking for a first-rate *L'italiana* on CD can turn to the finely scaled and skilfully recorded 2008 Rossini in Wildbad Festival production on Naxos. There we hear a near-exemplary cast dashingly and exactingly led by Alberto Zedda, that late-lamented master of all things Rossinian, one of whose most distinguished pupils, we shouldn't be surprised to hear, was Vasilisa Berzhanskaya. **Richard Osborne**

Selected comparison:

Zedda *Naxos 8 660284/5 (9/10)*

Rota

Il cappello di paglia de Firenze

Piotr Buszewski *ten* ..... Fadinard
Tetiana Miyus *sop* ..... Elena
Daeho Kim *bass* ..... Nonancourt
Anna Brull *mez* ..... Baroness di Champigny
Ivan Oreščanin *bar* ..... Beaupertuis
Antonia Cosmina Stancu *mez* ..... Anaide
Dariusz Perczak *bar* ..... Emilio
Martin Fournier *ten* ..... Vezinet
Mario Lerchenberger *ten* ..... Felice/Achille di Rosalba
Chorus of Graz Opera; Graz Philharmonic Orchestra / Daniele Squeo

Capriccio (C5466 ② • 107')
Includes libretto and translation

This appears to be the first digital recording of Nino Rota's 1955 comedy after a French play by Eugène Labiche and Marc-Michel, *Il cappello di paglia di Firenze* ('The Florentine Straw Hat'). Rota's third opera of 10 is also his best known, its assembly of small-town stock characters extending the tradition of both Donizetti and the *commedia dell'arte* but bestowing on it the composer's ability to capture fleeting tenderness amid all the high jinks, even if he is cribbing an awful lot off Puccini.

The story is of Fadinard, a young man about to marry, whose horse discovers the headgear of the title and munches through it. The hat's owner needs an identical replacement to hide the fact that she was in flagrante with a soldier while it was taken, and insists on hiding in Fadinard's apartment until one is sourced. A domestic farce ensues as the wedding guests arrive, with order only restored when a matching hat is finally procured and the wedding can continue (and the affair, of course … this is Italy).

The work rushes by, a series of highly woven vignettes that capture the nature of a scene or an off-the-shelf character – Rota's strong suit on screen as well as on stage – but perhaps not much more. Rota's music is a blend of *verismo*, *Schicchi*-like *buffa* and operetta, but lacks the latter's consistent sparkle and verve, perhaps as the story is clunkily told (Rota himself was a co-librettist). Shapely tunes are in abundance but you won't remember any of them. The phantoms of other composers drift by at quite a rate, Mozart, Puccini and Leoncavallo appearing most frequently.

Listening, you have to remind yourself what a treat some of Rota's tricks would work on stage. He knows how to marshal an opera's moving parts, chorus included (as was obvious from *Il due timidi*, 1950 – Dynamic, 4/19), and can occasionally string together a sequence with sufficient momentum and unpredictability to bring a scene alive. The ear pricks up at the duet 'Caro signore', with its louche obbligato violin and clarinet, one of a few flashes of impeccable style. The rest of the time, Rota can appear to be focusing on simply wrestling all the jokes, characters and plot information down into score.

The big number is Fadinard's 'Io voglio quel cappello', sung at the work's main-stage La Scala debut by a young Juan Diego Flórez in 1998 and delivered here with no lack of seductive Italianate legato – and a ringing top note – by Piotr Buszewski. The equivalent moment for Fadinard's fiancée Elena is 'Papà, gli voglio bene', sung with impressive control by Tetiana Miyus, whose soprano is lined with a steely strength. You can imagine both those moments heightening the atmosphere inside a theatre. Whether you have the patience and imagination to listen to the surrounding two hours of farce with nothing to look at – even in the company of Daniele Squeo's scrupulous conducting – is another question. **Andrew Mellor**

R Strauss

Ariadne auf Naxos

Krassimira Stoyanova *sop* ..... Ariadne
Sophie Koch *mez* ..... Composer
Jessica Pratt *sop* ..... Zerbinetta
AJ Glueckert *ten* ..... Bacchus
Markus Werba *bar* ..... Music-Master
Liviu Holender *bar* ..... Harlequin
Luca Bernard *ten* ..... Scaramuccio
Jacoub Eisa *bass* ..... Truffaldino
Paul Schweinester *ten* ..... Brighella
Maria Nazarova *sop* ..... Naiad
Anna Doris Capitelli *mez* ..... Dryad
Liubov Medvedeva *sop* ..... Echo
Franz Tscherne *spkr* ..... Major-Domo
Orchestra of the Maggio Musicale, Florence / Daniele Gatti
Stage director **Matthias Hartmann**
Video director **Davide Mancini**

Dynamic (37970 DVD; 57970 Blu-ray Disc • 133' • s)
Recorded live at the Teatro della Pergola, Florence, June 27-29, 2022
Includes synopsis

This staging of *Ariadne auf Naxos* from Florence's Maggio Musicale starts with a striking – not to say disturbing – image: the Major-Domo wheels away a frail, slumped figure in underwear in a wheelchair. This, one is left to infer, is the richest man in Vienna, who then disappears, not to be seen again. His wealth, in Matthias Hartmann's modern production, is visible throughout, though, in a variety of artworks littered around the stage, including a Giacometti-like sculpture, on which hangs the desert-island backcloth.

But beyond this first detail, the staging offers nothing especially original or challenging: a conventional modern-dress affair that conveys the action effectively rather than interestingly. Similarly, the cast assembled under Daniele Gatti's baton is respectable rather than sensational.

Pablo Ruiz and Ricardo Seguel sing in a period-instrument account of Rossini's L'italiana in Algeri from the Concertgebouw – see review on page 87

PHOTOGRAPHY: BARTOLOMEO DANDOLO

Krassimira Stoyanova is stretched by the demands of Ariadne nowadays and is not at her best early in the Opera, but she's a fine artist who rallies to give a moving, honest performance in the final scene – although it must be said that, like others in the cast, her German can be a little approximate.

Sophie Koch is an experienced Composer, and though likewise not as fresh as she once was, still turns in an effective performance. Jessica Pratt is a likeable, lively Zerbinetta, with impressively easy coloratura. AJ Glueckert doesn't possess the ringing Heldentenor of an ideal Bacchus but sings and acts movingly, imbuing the big duet with an affecting dramatic integrity. Markus Werba is a superb Music-Master and Franz Tscherne a brilliantly supercilious Major-Domo, even if he slightly fluffs his most important line. The other roles are all ably filled.

Gatti conducts the score with evident affection, his account unrushed and expansive, moving in the Opera's overture and achieving a noble sense of grandeur in the final minutes. The playing is always competent but hardly distinguished, conjuring up only hints of the magic that this score can convey. Taken overall, then, this is an admirable achievement, if hardly an *Ariadne* for the ages.

Dynamic's presentation includes synopsis and essay translated from the Italian, incidentally, but you'll need to have your wits about you to unravel them. **Hugo Shirley**

'Amore dolore'

Broschi Artaserse – Son qual nave ch'agitata **Duni** Demofoonte – Misero pargoletto; Sperai vicino il lido **Handel** Giulio Cesare – Overture. Rinaldo – Lascia ch'io pianga. Serse – Crude furie degl' orridi abissi; Ombra mai fù **Vivaldi** Farnace – Gelido in ogni vena. Orlando furioso – Sinfonia; Nel profondo cieco mondo; Sol da te, mio dolce amore. Tieteberga – Sento in seno
Nicolò Balducci *counterten* **Baroque Academy Gothenburg Symphony / Dan Laurin** *rec*
BIS (BIS2645 SACD • 72')
Inlcudes texts and translations

A fabulous opening from Baroque Academy Gothenburg Symphony. The scene from Riccardo Broschi's *Artaserse* fizzes with life, though it's a fire that could be better tempered in the Sinfonia to Handel's *Orlando furioso*, which occasionally oversteps into unstylish brazenness. Countertenor Nicolò Balducci is on fine form. His crystalline timbre is satisfyingly shaped into unrippled streams of vibrato-less legato. Balducci conjures delightful contrasts, and the athleticism of his coloratura is enviable.

The album's main weakness is its organisation. The Overture to Handel's *Giulio Cesare* into 'Lascia ch'io pianga' from *Rinaldo* is a highly awkward corner. And then an even more ridiculous decision: 'Lascia' is followed by 'Ombrai mai fù' from *Serse*. There's no logic or context at these points other than 'look how beautiful this music is': an organisation that destroys its own purpose as the intoxicating Handel arias blur into one another. Needless to say, there's far more inventive planning to be had than simply grouping the Handel movements together.

Yet Balducci's 'Lascia' is wonderful. There's some lovely ornamentation on the *da capo* repeat (though I could do without the fruitiness in the harpsichord around 2'38" that unnecessarily draws attention to itself). Clear and fun characterisation is the album's forte. The Vivaldian aesthetic is excellently and exuberantly painted in the movement from *Farnace*, and the extremely fine recorder-playing from Dan Laurin is an easy-to-pick highlight. **Mark Seow**

The Editors of Gramophone's sister music magazines – Jazzwise, Songlines and Musicals – recommend some of their favourite recordings from the past month

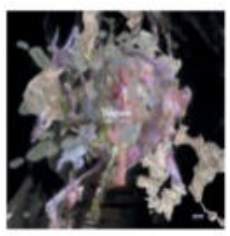
Jazz

Brought to you by jazzwise

Marius Gjersø

Yûgen

NXN NXN4006



One imagines that if you travel to the depths of a Norwegian fjord, there's a good chance you'll hear the melancholic cries of a trumpet – such is this nation's propensity for producing horn players of beguiling depth of sound. As such there's a common thread that links Arve Henriksen's uncanny emulation of traditional Japanese shakuhachi bamboo flute – via Nils Petter Movaer's industrial-strength drum and bass – to fellow Nordic horn-man Marius Gjersø, who takes his own cavernously emotive approach to blowing breathy sonic waves across a vast electro-acoustic tundra. On *Yûgen* – a word that describes 'an awareness of the universe that triggers emotional responses too deep and powerful for words' – Gjersø draws inspiration from a visit to Japan. Backed with aching restraint by a softly thrumming quartet of cellist Kaja Fjellberg Pettersen, double bassist Sebastian Haugen, electric bassist Jo Berger Myhre, and guitarist Stian Larsen with occasional, muted beats, Gjersø also adds subtle static buzzes and fizzes that provide a gauzy lo-fi edge. Yet, the sheer breathless beauty of *Yûgen* is indeed, hard to put into words. **Mike Flynn**

Ingrid Laubrock

The Last Quiet Place

Pyroclastic Records PR24

Inspired by the writings of environmental journalist Elizabeth Kolbert, German saxophonist/composer Ingrid Laubrock composed most of the music for *The Last Quiet Place* in solitude and outdoors – but this powerful album confirms she wasn't intending a music of tranquil withdrawal. Laubrock's ever-expanding compositional vision forms a genre-fluid super-sextet here, capable of shifting seamlessly between free-jazz, avant-rock, and delicate classical-strings textures. The subtly-structured, jazz/classical 'Anticipation' epitomises the album's broad palette. 'Grammy Season' is a terrific outburst of jostling free-jazz, and the title track a soft-strummed guitar groove from the orchestrally-resourceful Brandon Seabrook that becomes a swaying reverie with Tom Rainey's unobtrusive percussion beneath and Laubrock's airborne soprano lines above. 'Afterglow' is a slow tenor/drums conversation wrapped in warm strings harmonies. Laubrock's openness to so many contemporary sounds at once seems to have hit a new level. **John Fordham**

World Music

Brought to you by SONGLINES

Martin Hayes & The Common Ground Ensemble

Peggy's Dream

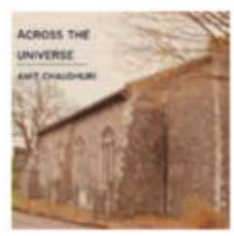
Faction Records / 251

Lovers of The Gloaming will be expecting the best from Clare fiddler extraordinaire Martin Hayes and the Common Ground Ensemble, and in *Peggy's Dream*, no one will be disappointed. It's a stunning record, one that may require plenty of turns to allow its layers and details to seep through the listener. The Ensemble of cellist Kate Ellis, pianist Cormac McCarthy, guitarist Kyle Sanna and Brian Donnellan on bouzouki, harmonium and concertina conjure pure magic across its nine tracks, and Hayes' playing is utterly sublime. Opener 'The Boyne Water' all but shimmers with musical tension and release, setting off via gentle solo piano before Hayes' fiddle drops in, piano and cello swelling up for their close-up before Hayes returns, and a slow descent via bouzouki and piano leads into that final solo piano again. The title track is an ethereal beauty. There's a deep lyricism and an improvisatory conjuring from all concerned, collectively roaming far without losing touch with their sources. A classic. **Tim Cumming**

Amit Chaudhuri

Across the Universe

Amit Chaudhuri



Amit Chaudhuri is a one-off in India, a writer, intellectual and composer. If you had to reach for equivalents elsewhere you might think of a David Byrne or Caetano Veloso – clever as hell but fear not, like them this album is not a dry academic work, but full of real joy. There are some head-scratching collisions, like the final track which mixes Joe Zawinul's 'In a Silent Way' with the Indian National Anthem, written by Tagore. An oblique piece of anti-nationalism or merely a couple of beguiling tunes which work together? He says it's a 're-contextualisation', reclaiming the anthem for its musicality. The Beatles 'Across the Universe' it turns out works with a Rageshri raga. You wouldn't call Chaudhuri's voice one of the greats but it's very effective in this context, surprisingly sweet and seductive. He is joined by a relatively minimal line-up of Matt Hodges on delicate piano and keyboards, Paul Williams on the bass, Nafees Irfan on the tabla, and Adam Moore on the guitars. The way he destroys boundaries is liberating, a triumph of free-thinking. A thought-provoking but delicious listen. **Peter Culshaw**

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Musical Theatre

Brought to you by MUSICALS

Sondheim Unplugged, Vol 3

Various soloists / Joseph Goodrich

Yellow Sound

Sondheim privately admitted that hearing his songs shorn from their context was not his favourite way to experience his material. But in yet another case of 'Trust the art, not the artist', his songs have often been beautifully taken up, as here, by fine singing actors in cabaret. Unplugged, yes, but also stripped back: we simply have voices and expressive piano, a decision that happily focuses on the essentials. Although it opens wittily with 'Opening Doors', the *Merrily We Roll Along* song about starting out, sung with a sextet led by the still-nimble Jim Walton, most of the rest of the disc features New York Sondheim alumni visiting songs they didn't sing. Fans still savour Pamela Myers's 'Another Hundred People' in the original Company: here, at 75, she sings (with delicious gusto) 'Me and My Town', Angela Lansbury's opening number from *Anyone Can Whistle*. Eric Michael Gillett sings an exuberant 'Hades' from *The Frogs*, and Claybourne Elder brings ringing confidence to 'The Flag Song', the opening number cut from *Assassins*. Although Sondheim collectors will come to hear old favourites, they'll stay for tendernesses like 'What Can You Lose?', a duet for Madonna and Mandy Patinkin here throatily and evocatively sung by Natalie Douglas. **David Benedict**

Meredith Willson's The Music Man

Broadway Cast Recording

Soloists; Broadway Orchestra / Patrick Vaccariello

Accidental Jacket Entertainment / Time Life

As a native Iowan of a certain age, there is no musical more deeply ingrained in my DNA than *The Music Man*. I am therefore tickled pink to report that the new Broadway cast recording is scintillating from start to finish. Not that it's going to please everyone, as it takes a major risk in re-voicing Harold Hill and Marian Paroo to capitalise on Hugh Jackman's soaring upper register and Sutton Foster's rueful, gutsy alto. When performances are as dazzling as these, though, that gamble pays off.

Jonathan Tunick's orchestrations follow the basic blueprint of the 1957 originals while invigorating them with more sophisticated harmonies. He also knows when to pare things back to the essentials. This is really Jackman and Foster's show, though, so your fondness for their *sui generis* performances will necessarily impact your enjoyment of the recording. Neither possesses a classically beautiful instrument, but both exude old-time showbiz knowhow and charm, and have an irresistibly playful rapport with each other. Once you make the mental adjustment from Robert Preston's rugged baritone to Jackman's lighter baritenor, it's smooth sailing. The role of Marian has been more significantly reconceived. Foster doesn't have Barbara Cook's shimmering soprano, but she's a genius at communicating character through song. **Jim Munson**

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REISSUES & ARCHIVE

Our monthly guide to the most exciting catalogue releases, historic issues and box-sets

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Jessye Norman's Unreleased Masters

Tim Ashley welcomes the belated issue of the soprano's suppressed recordings

Speculation has long been rife over the albums that Jessye Norman, notorious perfectionist that she was, suppressed for a variety of reasons during her lifetime, three of which have now been released with permission from her family and estate. While the set will doubtless stifle some of the rumours that have circulated over time, its appearance also raises ethical questions about balancing respect for an artist's wishes with the greater understanding of their artistry that the release of posthumous material will inevitably bring. What, we might also ask, does it tell us about Norman's judgement of her own work? And was she right to suppress what she did?

We can well understand what qualms she may have had about the first disc, an hour's worth of extracts from *Tristan und Isolde* from 1998, with Kurt Masur and the Leipzig Gewandhaus, possibly planned as a complete recording: accounts of its origins differ, though they agree that the sessions were uncomfortably tense due to interpretative differences between soprano and conductor. More pertinent here, though, is the fact that by 1998, Norman's voice was no longer what is was. We're aware of effort at the top: the Bs in the Narration and Curse sound uncertain, the Cs in the love duet only fractionally less so. Where we might expect to hear her velvety lower register in phrases such as 'Todgeweihtes Haupt! Todgeweihtes Herz!', the tone seems curiously thin.

There are, it is true, compensating insights: the abstraction and wounded pride of the opening scenes are unsparingly realised, for example. Thomas Moser is her scrupulous Tristan, the pair of them sounding fastidiously beautiful in the love duet, rather than rapturous or sensual. They're not helped, though, by Masur's sometimes erratic tempos or by Hanna Schwarz making heavy weather of Brangäne's every utterance. It's all far from ideal. A commercial release of Norman's live 1981 Tanglewood performance of Act 2, with Jon Vickers and the Boston Symphony, electrifying under Seiji Ozawa, would have been preferable. Currently available on YouTube, it gives us a far greater understanding of what Norman at her best might have been like as Isolde, a role she was never to sing complete.

In 1989, meanwhile, she re-recorded Strauss's *Vier letzte Lieder* live in Berlin with the Philharmonic under James Levine for DG, to be coupled with the *Wesendonck Lieder*, also recorded live with the same forces three years later. Satisfied with the Wagner, she nevertheless vetoed the release of the Strauss, reportedly because she was unhappy with a single note. If that indeed was the case, then her judgement seems unduly harsh, as that recalcitrant note is impossible to identify, try as one might.

She may, however, have been concerned by comparisons with her already classic 1983 Philips recording with Masur (2/84), though there are substantial differences between the two. Norman was similarly in sumptuous voice in 1989, singing with much the same refulgence we find six years earlier, and her dynamic control in 'Im Abendrot' is breathtaking as before. Without being unduly swift, however, Levine is urgent where Masur is expansive and contemplative, and those who consider the earlier recording too stately will find the later version preferable. The *Wesendonck Lieder* are superb, too, more searching than Norman's earlier recording with Colin Davis and the LSO (Philips, 7/76), though not quite scaling the expressive heights of her live 1991 Salzburg performance of the piano version, again with Levine, eventually released by Orfeo (1/17).

The third disc was also made live, with the Boston Symphony and Ozawa in 1994 this time, and presents us with a group of cantatas about classical heroines – Haydn's *Scena di Berenice*, Berlioz's *Cléopâtre* and Britten's *Phaedra*. Norman objected to the apparently boxy recorded sound of the Berlioz: one wonders why nothing was done about it at the time, though it has now, I gather, been substantially remastered. This really is a marvellous disc, in fact. Norman's technique in the Haydn, all immaculate trills and *fioritura*, impresses as much as the intensity she brings to it. *Cléopâtre*'s recitatives have, if anything, even more bite and power than on her earlier recording with Daniel Barenboim and the Orchestre de Paris (DG, 7/82), though Ozawa is almost riskily slow in the closing pages, where the strings trace faltering heartbeats as life gradually ebbs away. And *Phaedra*, with every word fiercely enunciated, is all the more powerful for its dramatic containment and restraint. It's a great shame that we haven't been able to hear it until now. As a whole, the set is uneven, though the last two discs find Norman often at her finest, and are essential listening. G

THE RECORDING

Jessye Norman The Unreleased Masters
Decca ③ 485 2984

BOX-SET *Round-up*

Rob Cowan listens to two giants of the Baroque, a classic pianist and recent Rachmaninov

Jos van Veldhoven's first recording of **Bach**'s *St Matthew Passion* from 1997 (Channel Classics, 5/98), opined Jonathan Freeman-Attwood, 'is rather more rooted and affecting than this sophisticated, incisive and emotionally graphic account. But the advantage here is a supreme recorded sound which places the listener in the solar plexus of Bach's peerless score.' JFA was writing in the context of reviewing Veldhoven's 2010 *St Matthew Passion* (6/11). He was equally keen on Veldhoven's 2006 account of the B minor Mass (4/07), which he found 'uncomplicated in its touching naturalness; the opening *Kyrie* may sound parochial on first hearing but the evolution of the three movements is satisfyingly logical and yet also deftly anticipates a beautifully pointed *Gloria*. The slower, reflective sections encourage a refinement which extends beyond usual Baroque geniality towards something genuinely lyrical.' Fresh and rhythmic, too, as in 'Gloria in excelsis'. These distinguished Netherlands Bach Society recordings are adorned by a generally excellent range of soloists and focus the very specific characters of each work. For example, the pained, pulsing wind harmonies that open the *St John Passion* are more emotionally intrusive than on Sigiswald Kuijken's vocally incisive 2011 recording (Challenge Classics, 2/12).

Both recordings are now included in boxes that feature the two major Passions, the B minor Mass and the *Christmas Oratorio*, Channel alone adding the cantata *Unser Mund sei voll Lachens* (No 110) and the D major *Magnificat*; I revisited the Kuijken collection for my 'Box-set Round-up' in January. I could live with either set – both are distinctive in their different ways. David Vickers commented on Veldhoven's 'pensive and deeply felt Bach Passions' (6/05) and for that reason alone I would in the first instance incline in the direction of Channel Classics' superbly recorded set.

An equally inward-looking albeit purely instrumental take on Bach arrives in the context of '**Carl Seemann**: The Orfeo Recordings' (performances from 1952-79), and a superb 1965 stereo set of Bach's six keyboard Partitas, playing that combines a crisp, dancing quality (sample the opening Praeambulum of the Fifth Partita) with the greatest poise (the First Partita's Praeludium), a sense of improvisation (the Toccata that opens the last Partita) and a trancelike quality that reminded me of – and this might surprise you – Rachmaninov, who recorded the same movement (the Sarabande from the Fourth Partita) for Victor so many years ago. In its quiet sublimity and inner vitality this Bach-playing is about as good as it gets, certainly in the Partitas.

As to the rest, Mozart's Piano Concerto No 25 in C under Wilfried Boettcher is heavier and less urgent than an earlier DG studio version under Fritz Lehmann; likewise, Beethoven's Second Concerto takes its time (though never sounds laboured), and there are duo sonatas with violinist Wolfgang Schneiderhan (with whom Seemann recorded on numerous occasions for DG: see 'The Complete Carl Seemann Edition on Deutsche Grammophon') and cellist Enrico Mainardi (including Reger's memorable 37-minute Fourth Sonata in A minor). The final disc, a vintage all-mono bonus, finds Paul Hindemith conducting his Symphony in B flat for concert band, his *Four Temperaments* with Clara Haskil and Berg's Chamber Concerto with Seemann and violinist Wolfgang Marschner. All three performances are played with considerable intensity.

Liveliness rather than intensity characterises Rachel Podger's superbly recorded **Vivaldi** for Channel Classics, which might happily be daubed 'dancing Baroque'. *La stravaganza* (with Arte dei Suonatori) won *Gramophone*'s 2003 Baroque Album of the Year Award. And no wonder. Take the third concerto from the set, the opening *Allegro* swift and keenly accented, the music's meaningful repetitions pirouetting with a purpose, the playing of Arte dei Suonatori always alert. Or there's the mock-martial *Adagio e spiccato* opening of Op 3 No 2 for two violins and cello in G minor (with Brecon Baroque this time), which soon morphs into another fiery *Allegro*. No 10 from the same set is for four violins and cello, while turning to the 12 concertos known as *La cetra* (with the Holland Baroque Society) shows Vivaldi at his most lyrical for the opening *Allegro non molto* of the third concerto, a characteristic that Podger and her collaborators reflect in their performance. *The Four Seasons* is played with unhackneyed attention to mood and colour – meaning it's neither aggressive nor Romantic – and there are attractive double concertos with Judith Steenbrink as the second soloist.

And so to the 80th anniversary of **Rachmaninov**'s death and an excellent gathering of the symphonies and other important orchestral works, principally the *Symphonic Dances* and *The Isle of the Dead*. Leonard Slatkin directs the Detroit Symphony Orchestra in performances that combine fine sound with expressive ardour. At the close of the Dances the tam-tam honours the *laisser vibrer* direction, loudly skidding forwards after the rest of the orchestra has stopped. Best perhaps is the Third Symphony, where Slatkin's approach combines elements of the Old and New Worlds, resonating romance alongside sophistication, especially in the second movement. Also included is a warmly played account of the *Vocalise*. While in general I'd give John Wilson's more transparent Chandos recordings top billing, not to mention such key historic interpreters as Nikolai Golovanov and Rachmaninov himself, Slatkin in Detroit at budget price provides a desirable bargain for newcomers to this repertoire. G

THE RECORDINGS

JS Bach Passions, B minor Mass, etc
Netherlands Bach Society / Veldhoven
Channel Classics ⑩ CCSBOX7523

The Orfeo Recordings Carl Seemann
Orfeo ⑥ C260007

Vivaldi Violin Concertos
Rachel Podger; Arte dei Suonatori; Holland Baroque, Brecon Baroque
Channel Classics ⑦ CCSBOX7423

Rachmaninov Symphonies. Orch Wks
Detroit SO / Slatkin
Naxos ③ 8 503278

REPLAY

Rob Cowan's monthly survey of historic reissues and archive recordings

Maestros and virtuosos

Karl Böhm is at his unconstrained best in live SWR recordings from 1951 to 1979

Listening to live recordings featuring **Karl Böhm** can be a genuine education. Take Bruckner's Seventh Symphony, the first movement clocking up exactly 19'40" on his live (1964) and studio Vienna Philharmonic recordings, put out by Audite (Replay, 3/22) and DG respectively, whereas the live broadcast with the SWR Symphony Orchestra from 1974 included as part of a six-CD set of Böhm's SWR recordings from 1951 to 1979 pushes the tempo forwards by a full two minutes. This is Böhm at his unconstrained best, though the seamless *Adagio* (capped by the triumphant optional cymbal clash and timpani roll) is drawn with the utmost affection, as is the Scherzo's lyrical Trio. But viewed overall this is a heroic Seventh and make no mistake. Audite's disc adds Hindemith's rarely heard Concerto for Winds, Harp and Orchestra, whereas the SWR box includes a performance of the *Symphonic Metamorphoses* where the 'Turandot Scherzo' sounds like Bartók's Miraculous Mandarin ascending the stairs in a state of extreme inebriation. It's a riot of a performance, as is a keenly driven version of Dvořák's *New World* Symphony, where Böhm sounds like a young, fired-up Rafael Kubelík.

The set opens with an autumnal Mozart 40th, the first movement relatively gentle and beautifully played, and there are three Beethoven symphonies (Nos 2, 7 and 9), all of them sympathetically conducted, the *Choral* especially. Brahms's First Symphony is at once magisterial and exciting, with a warmly embracing *Andante sostenuto* slow movement that in its inspirational flight is the equal of any I've heard conducted by Furtwängler. As to concertos, the Zagreb-born pianist Branka Musulin is spontaneity personified in Schumann's Concerto and for Beethoven's Fourth she chooses Clara Schumann's wonderful first-movement cadenza which, and here I quote Rainer Peters's excellent booklet note, 'she did not only prefer to Beethoven's cadenzas, but also to those by Brahms [Maria Yudina's choice], Busoni, d'Albert and Saint-Saëns'. As CD tributes to Böhm go, this is as good as it gets.

A further gallery of noteworthy German conductors features on SWR Classic's 10-CD collection of **Legendary Pianists**, the keyboard focus being on Géza Anda, Friedrich Gulda, Clara Haskil, Jörg Demus, Paul Badura-Skoda, Alicia de Larrocha, Wilhelm Kempff, Wilhelm Backhaus, Annie Fischer, Claudio Arrau and Sviatoslav Richter. Some of these radio recordings may be familiar, others not. For example, Anda in Bartók's Concerto No 2 under Hans Müller-Kray suffers a rather confused first movement, though the *Adagio – Presto – Adagio* second movement is fully back on target. Anda cuts a profile that is both grand and elegant in Tchaikovsky's B flat Concerto under Ferdinand Leitner and Chopin's First Concerto sympathetically conducted by Ernest Bour, and combines his usual colouristic skills with a sense of menace in Ravel's Left Hand Concerto (ie the clipped central section), an interpretation under Hans Rosbaud that is as dramatic as it is austere. Rosbaud again takes the baton for Anda's deeply poetic account of Rachmaninov's Second Concerto, the second movement being especially memorable, Anda's swirling first entry in the finale dazzling in its brilliance. In fact the whole of the finale is articulated and phrased with the utmost imagination.

But for subtle nuancing, the star performance has to be Beethoven's Second Concerto featuring Kempff under Müller-Kray, a joy to encounter, with magical turns of phrase occurring on virtually every page of the score. I don't think I've ever heard better. The coupling on that particular disc, Beethoven's *Emperor* Concerto, finds Backhaus playing under Joseph Keilberth's direction, a typically forthright, unfussy performance, feelingly played too, that compares favourably with Backhaus's commercial recordings of the piece. Alicia de Larrocha offers a fairly measured account of the Third Concerto (certainly in the first movement) with Ernest Bour a securely dependable rostrum collaborator. It's a dapper albeit thoughtful performance, well worth preserving, and is coupled on her CD with Mozart's great E flat Concerto (No 22, K482) conducted by García Navarro, where Larrocha's playing, very beautiful though it is, at times verges on sounding Chopinesque.

Eliahu Inbal judges the mighty scale of Brahms's First Concerto perfectly so that Arrau can spread his pianistic wings without feeling constrained, whereas the Second Concerto falls to Backhaus (under Müller-Kray), always at home in its rugged terrain (though note Victor Schiøler, reviewed below). Annie Fischer is compelling in Schumann's Concerto, while Friedrich Gulda is the perfect classicist in Mozart (No 23, K488, with Müller-Kray) and Haydn (D major Concerto

under Rosbaud). Clara Haskil is as usual matchlessly eloquent in Mozart under Carl Schuricht (No 9, K271, and No 19, K459), while Demus and Badura-Skoda are similarly persuasive in Nos 27 in B flat, K595, under Müller-Kray, and No 24 in C minor, K491, a work that especially suits Schuricht. Most of these recordings, all of which are very well transferred, date from the 1950s through to the 1970s, whereas the latest was taken down in 1993, a coupling of Saint-Saëns's Fifth (the *Egyptian*) and the Gershwin Concerto with Sviatoslav Richter under Christoph Eschenbach. Idiomatic? The Saint-Saëns, yes, by any standards a marvellous performance. But the Gershwin? A little formal, perhaps, but a fascinating encounter. In short, another terrific 'historic' set from SWR Classic.

THE RECORDINGS

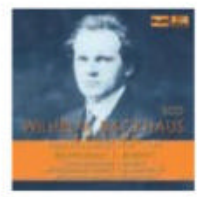
The SWR Recordings
SWR Stuttgart RSO / Karl Böhm
SWR Classic ⑥ SWR19123CD

Legendary Pianists: Famous Piano Concertos
SWR Classic ⑩ SWR19433CD

Backhaus in Brahms

Returning to Wilhelm Backhaus, Brahms was always among the pianist's great loves and his earliest records include numerous disc premieres of Brahms miniatures. Profil's collection of Backhaus's 'Early Recordings' (a previous set on PH21003, released in 2021, covers recordings from 1908 to 1961) includes a good many of them, not least a gruff, impulsive December 1932 disc of the Op 4 Scherzo, the two Op 79 Rhapsodies from the same period, no less impressive in their rugged grandeur (the G minor all but self-combusts), and various other pieces, many of them dating from Brahms's later years. Don't expect the sort of subtle tonal gradations you hear from Gieseking, Lupu, Kempff, Curzon and their like: this is impetuous playing that makes the music sound as if it's being spontaneously improvised. We're also given two sets of Variations (the *Paganini* set is extremely forthright) and both concertos, the First a firmly structured account – still a contender even after more than 90 years (1932) – superbly conducted by Adrian Boult (BBC SO), the Second with the Staatskapelle Dresden in 1939 under Böhm, less imposing overall, perhaps, but still a strong performance. Beethoven, Backhaus's principal speciality on disc, is represented by his recordings of the Fourth and Fifth Concertos under Landon Ronald, from 1929 and 1927 respectively, playing of the greatest fluidity and poise, and a group of sonatas, Nos 8 (1927), 14, 26 and 32 (all from 1934). All combine characteristic directness with flexible phrasing and the sort of impulsiveness that makes the Brahms items so distinguished. With generally excellent transfers I'd call this, and its predecessor, essential supplements to Decca's complete Backhaus recordings.

THE RECORDING



Early Recordings 1927-1939
Wilhelm Backhaus
Profil ⑤ PH23001

Bold as brass in B flat

The fine Danish pianist Victor Schiøler (1899-1967) studied with two piano legends, Ignaz Friedman and Artur Schnabel. The young Schnabel once heard Johannes Brahms play in a performance of his First Piano Quartet where for all the missed notes (said Schnabel), it 'was in the true grand manner'. Rachmaninov, whose Third Concerto rivalled Brahms's two in scale and intensity, admired Friedman's playing and considered him a great virtuoso in a style more romantic than his own. At 17, the Hungarian violinist and conductor Carl von Garaguly (1900-84) – the authoritative conductor of the Danish Radio Symphony Orchestra on the 1952 Brahms B flat presented on Danacord's latest Schiøler double pack – became assistant deputy leader of the Berlin Philharmonic. So this magnificent performance arrives loaded with exactly the right ingredients, specifically relating to what Schnabel referred to as 'the grand manner'. It's a massive performance, wild, reckless but also considered where needs be. Try Schiøler's take-up of the main theme from the first movement at 6'26": you can almost smell the aroma of cigars and imagine the master himself, leaning this way or that, lost in the majesty of his own creation. Then there's Beethoven, the Fourth Concerto under Erik Tuxen recorded in 1949, as classical as Backhaus or Serkin, with an especially impressive central *Andante con moto*, and the First Concerto (1966), for which the much-underrated Albert Wolff takes the baton, not quite as good, but almost. Additionally, we're treated to Saint-Saëns's entertaining *Variations on a Theme of Beethoven* for two pianos (with Peter Westenholz), Hindemith's appealing Clarinet Sonata in B flat with Ib Eriksson and three popular shorter pieces. Good to have, but the Brahms Concerto is what makes this set quite unmissable. The transfers are excellent.

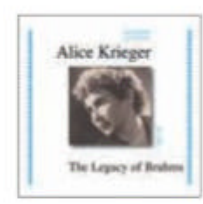
THE RECORDING

The Great Danish Pianist, Vol 6 Victor Schiøler
Danacord ② DACOCD962/3

The art of Alice Krieger

If by now you're on a Brahms 'roll', you might beam up to 10'44" on Alice Krieger's recording of the Variations, Op 21 No 1, which positively swings. Incidentally, Krieger includes most of the repeats that Backhaus omits (see above). Furthermore, her playing of three Rhapsodies (Op 79 Nos 1 and 2, Op 119 No 4) has all the grit exhibited by Backhaus (and Schnabel in his recording of the G minor). Krieger – who was Jewish, born in Karlsruhe in 1895 and taught by a former pupil of Clara Schumann – was from a family that had both musical and culinary connections with the composer (who regularly ate in a kosher restaurant). Her style of playing has that same craggy profile that informs Schiøler's approach to Brahms for a programme that features various late pieces including a remarkable performance of the Intermezzo Op 118 No 6, music that initially seems utterly lost before it gains a sense of direction, with a vengeance. Suddenly you're catapulted into the composer's world, and the recording, originally made for the Lyrichord label in 1964 when Krieger was 69, is much improved over the original LP, which was faulty pitch-wise. Let me close by quoting a testimonial from the much-admired composer-pianist Eugen d'Albert, who claimed that Krieger 'possesses a spiritual profundity in the performance of the works such as is seldom encountered today'. And when you consider that d'Albert died in 1932, that should tell you all you need to know. This is truly a historic recording, both in its musical value and in its historical significance. Roger Smithson provides sympathetic annotations. Ⓖ

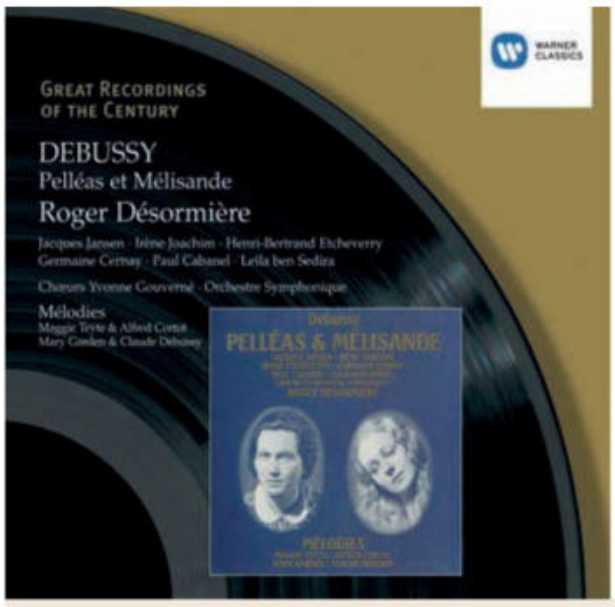
THE RECORDING



The Legacy of Brahms
Alice Krieger
Maestro Editions ME167
maestroeditions.com

PHOTOGRAPHY: SWR/HUGO JEHLE

Classics RECONSIDERED



GRAMOPHONE 100
CELEBRATING A CENTURY OF RECORDED CLASSICAL MUSIC

Turning to the 1940s for our next centenary special edition, **Mark Pullinger** and **Tim Ashley** discuss a Pelléas et Mélisande that has continually been cited as a benchmark

Debussy

Pelléas et Mélisande

Joachim *sop* **Jansen, Etcheverry** *bars* **Cernay** *mez* **Cabanel** *bass* **Ben Sedira** *sop* **Rousseau, Narçon** *basses* **Yvonne Gouverné Choir; Symphony Orchestra / Roger Désormière**

Warner Classics (orig HMV)

Collectors now have the opportunity to hear for themselves why we treasured the twenty 78s on which this was originally issued. *Pelléas*, muted in action but powerfully atmospheric, is an opera which lends itself ideally to the gramophone, and over the years there have been several fine versions of it; but in this one the placing of the voices is such that every single word is crystal clear. More important, every word is invested with meaning by a native French cast which had immersed itself totally in the emotional nuances and overtones of the text. The strength of the performance owed much to the fact that Irène Joachim, Jacques Jansen and Henri Etcheverry had already sung the work many times under Desormiere at the Opéra-Comique. Joachim had studied the role of Mélisande with its creator, Mary Garden; and both she and Jansen had been coached by Georges Viseur, who with Messager had been the répétiteur for the opera's first performance. Jansen with his free, youthful-toned production and Joachim with her silvery voice and intelligent response to every verbal nuance, set standards for the doomed lovers that have never been surpassed; but even more impressive is Etcheverry's Golaud, which has yet to be rivalled. Leila ben Sedira gives one of the most convincing portrayals I have ever heard of the child Yniold; and Germaine Cernay and Paul Cabanel (who alone is just a trifle free with the text in places) fill the parts of the older characters with distinction. **Lionel Salter** (8/85)

Mark Pullinger Reconsidering Roger Désormière's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, we noticed that the first *Gramophone* review did not appear until Lionel Salter's in 1985, by which time the recording had long since achieved classic status and had been challenged by several later versions, not least those of Ernest Ansermet (two of them), Herbert von Karajan and Pierre Boulez. Salter waxes lyrical about the set of 20 78rpm records he treasured as a collector. Why the delay in the review?

Tim Ashley I think we need to remember that it was made by French HMV in tandem with performances at the Opéra-Comique in 1941 – in occupied Paris in wartime, in other words. There would have been few means then of distribution outside Axis-occupied territories, though the Correpondence section in November 1943's *Gramophone* tantalisingly mentions its existence.

MP That would certainly explain its absence from *Gramophone*'s pages!

TA Doubtless it went on to become something of a collector's item, possibly as an import after the war. We find allusions to it here in the UK in reviews of later recordings (not everyone considered it a classic, in fact), but there's nothing about any official UK release until Salter reviewed its first appearance on LP. Hearing it wasn't an option for me, of course, when I first started listening to *Pelléas* with Ansermet's second version. Désormière came later. Do you share Salter's enthusiasm, though?

MP Not entirely. It's wonderful to hear francophone singers such as Irène Joachim, who was coached in the role of Mélisande by its creator, Mary Garden, and to get a feel for the French tradition of the era. And you certainly hear plenty of the singers – the recording heavily favours the voices, so every line is crystal-clear. But Debussy's score is a thing of whispers and shadows, and I feel that the wonders of the orchestra are often relegated to the background. Is this a problem for you too?

TA Less so, I think (though I have concerns elsewhere). It always seems to me to be carefully judged, in fact (in terms of 'whispers and shadows') – embodied in Désormière's delicate way with the textures, the forward placing of the voices, and the psychological detail of much of the singing.

MP I find Désormière's conducting suitably cool, playing down the Wagnerian aspects that someone like Karajan finds in Debussy's score. There's clarity in everything he does, which is a huge plus, although others create a greater sense of suffocating claustrophobia.

TA The transparency is admirable, I agree, even given the restricted sound and the backward placing of the orchestra. And I like the way Désormière unobtrusively presses forwards rather than lingering in places: the last act, which can drag if it's not carefully handled, feels not a second too long here. Yet – and this may be entirely personal – I often wonder whether he isn't too

Roger Désormière brought clarity and coolness to Pelléas et Mélisande's extraordinary score

understated in places and find myself hankering after the grander gestures of Ansermet or even Karajan, or, indeed, the edgier clarity of Boulez. There is violence in the work as well as restraint, after all, and some scenes here – Golaud's attack on Mélisande in Act 4, for instance – strike me as underplayed.

MP 'Underplayed' is the perfect word, Tim. There are more violent Golauds than Henri-Bertrand Etcheverry out there.

TA Indeed. But I also think you have to be a bit careful with Golaud: go too far in the opposite direction – as did George London, brutal on Ansermet's second recording, for instance – and you run the risk of losing the compassion Debussy feels for him. I do like Etcheverry's world-weariness at the start, I must say, and the unnerving way his self-control slips in the scene with Yniold.

MP I also find that the love scene between Jacques Jansen's Pelléas and Joachim's Mélisande lacks eroticism or any semblance of danger. Perhaps the close miking of the voices lends the recording a more conversational quality … Is it too tame?

TA Ah! Now, I find Jansen and Joachim convincing here, both wonderfully young-sounding and extraordinarily guileless. I think the tower scene is ravishing, particularly when Jansen sings 'Je les noue, je les nous aux branches du saule' in a way that is both naive and uncomprehendingly sexual. His tone is beautifully warm, too.

MP I like Joachim's girlish qualities as Mélisande – there's the impulsive, childlike way she plays with the ring at the Blind Men's Well in Act 2, for example. And Jansen – a proper *baryton Martin* – has a fresh, youthful timbre. The tower scene is beautifully sung and I'd agree about the sense of naivety, but I don't get that frisson of sexual tension I get in, say, Ansermet's first recording with Pierre Mollet and the incomparable Suzanne Danco.

TA Yes. Ansermet is certainly more immediate and sensual than Désormière is at this point. And Danco is utterly remarkable as Mélisande, I agree. She and Mollet sound more knowing than Joachim and Jansen, who suggest fragile innocence throughout; and Jansen has a telling lack of emotional awareness, until he reaches the Act 4 declaration of love. It's part and parcel of the understatement characteristic of the set as a whole, I think.

MP What do you make of the rest of the cast, in particular Leïla Ben Sedira as Yniold?

TA I like Ben Sedira a great deal: she captures the boy's terror in the scene with Golaud without resorting to shrieks or sobs. She's very touching in the encounter with the Shepherd, which can so easily misfire.

MP She's very fine, although I do prefer a boy soprano in the role (which is what Debussy had at the premiere).

TA I don't, meanwhile, quite understand Salter's remark about Paul Cabanel's Arkel being 'a trifle free with the text in places'. He sings it beautifully, in my opinion, though he strikes me as sounding a bit too young.

MP He sounds youthful, yes, but he was around 50 when this was recorded! It's a strong cast all round, even down to the splendid bass Armand Narçon as the Doctor in Act 5.

TA Narçon really is superb, and part of me always wishes he'd been cast as Arkel here. He had, in fact, already recorded the role for Columbia, in a 1928 abridgement of the opera (about 45 minutes' worth), expansively conducted by Georges Truc, a fine achievement, but one which the Désormière set eventually eclipsed. How, though, would you rate the latter overall within the opera's discography ?

MP I think it's still an important recording from a historical perspective, an example of French singing and playing not so far removed from the composer's own time. I do think that it's 'of its time', though, and was superseded swiftly after the war with that first Ansermet recording. It's an opera that continues to reveal its secrets as new generations of singers and conductors get their hands on it, such as the excellent François-Xavier Roth (Harmonia Mundi) and Pierre Dumoussaud (Alpha) have proved in recent years. What about you, Tim? How tall does Désormière stand in the opera's recorded history?

TA I've always admired it, though I do prefer other interpretations, Ansermet in particular – despite qualms about George London in his second version. Can we ever really choose a single *Pelléas*, though? Désormière, for me, encapsulates one way of doing it, a reined-in, muted way, perhaps, but not the only way. The work's ambiguities are such that different interpreters can take it in opposing directions, all of them valid and cogent. So Désormière's restraint contrasts with Ansermet's knowing sensuality, Boulez's fierce clarity or Karajan's post-romantic opulence: the list goes on into the present. It's a reflection, perhaps, of the opera's greatness, and its essential mystery and constant fascination. G

PHOTOGRAPHY: THE TULLY POTTER COLLECTION

Books

Andrew Farach-Colton welcomes new biography of Samuel Barber:

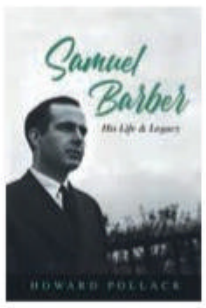
'Pollack is exceptionally conscientious in tracing the lives of Barber's musical works – their premieres, recordings and critical reactions'

Hugo Shirley reads a slim volume of a singer's insights and reflections:

'Throughout one relishes the special skill-set Bostridge brings to his task: a performer with a background in academic history'

Samuel Barber

His Life & Legacy
By Howard Pollack
University of Illinois Press, HB, 686pp, £54
ISBN 978-0-252-04490-8



In 2015 a suitcase filled with Samuel Barber's manuscripts, letters and journals was recovered from a dumpster on a construction site in New York City. This fortuitous discovery led Barbara Heyman to revise and expand her authoritative 1992 biography, *Samuel Barber: The Composer and His Music* (OUP). The new edition of Heyman's book appeared in 2020, and now, hard on its heels, comes *Samuel Barber: His Life & Legacy* by Howard Pollack, a professor at the University of Houston, Texas, and author of acclaimed biographies of Copland, Gershwin, Blitzstein and Carpenter.

Both books give richly detailed accounts of Barber's life and, not surprisingly perhaps, there's considerable overlap in the sources they reference. Both books also effectively interleave biography and musical analysis. Stylistically and philosophically, however, the authors's approaches are quite different.

Of the two volumes, Heyman's is the more straightforward. Her writing is clear and punchy, she generally sticks to factual reportage and her musical analyses tend to be descriptive, pitched to the reader who has some basic knowledge of music theory. Pollack, on the other hand, writes in a somewhat more florid style and fearlessly ventures into delicate matters involving the composer's private life, while his musical analyses largely presuppose a graduate-level grasp of musical mechanics.

Writing about the inspiration Barber found in Brahms, for example, Pollack dips his toe into psychoanalysis and goes beyond a mere musical kinship to suggest something more personal and profound. I'm not sure I buy all of it, in this case, but it does provide a fresh perspective, and one that can aid an understanding of Barber's developing style, particularly in early pieces such as the Cello Sonata.

A new biography of Samuel Barber explores the man behind the music

Pollack also offers a more rounded picture of Barber the man, and doesn't shy away from shining the spotlight on his less admirable traits. Heyman, for example, includes a letter from the composer to Mary Bok (his patron and founder of the Curtis Institute, where he studied) in which he describes being 'whirled into the Jewish maelstrom of Radio City', but she passes over the anti-Semitic sentiment without comment. Pollack quotes the same letter but links it with similar anti-Semitic statements – some made much later in his life – putting these cringeworthy remarks in the context of Barber's many mutually supportive friendships with Jewish artists.

Pollack also makes Barber's sexuality more of a central issue, going beyond his lifelong romantic and artistic partnership with Gian Carlo Menotti. Heyman, for example, gives only one mention of Orazio Orlando, to whom the composer dedicated his second opera, *Antony and Cleopatra* (composed for the 1966 gala opening of the Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center), describing Orlando as 'an Italian screen actor who was a close friend of Barber'. In fact, as Pollack points out, Barber and Orlando had an intimate relationship, which helps to explain why he would dedicate his grandest work to the young actor.

The man Pollack shows us can sometimes be hard to like. The writer

Reynolds Price, a friend of the composer, found that Barber 'had a hard edge that could suddenly flash out'. And Price recalls another Price – Leontyne, a loyal friend and colleague of Barber's – once saying 'Sam is such a *bitch*'. Yet these revelations of Barber's all-too-human flaws and foibles make him all the more real, and when Pollack gets to the composer's final years and his struggles with cancer, I was surprised to find myself teary-eyed.

Pollack is exceptionally conscientious in tracing the lives of Barber's musical works, as well, discussing not only premieres, performances, recordings and critical reactions but also the many ballets and dances that choreographers created to his work. Thus, where Heyman devotes three pages to an overview of the extraordinary number of performances, public events, film scores, books and pop songs that have employed or taken inspiration from Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, Pollack's appraisal takes up 20 pages.

Gramophone readers, in particular, may appreciate Pollack's exploration of Barber's discography and critical reaction to it. This includes reference to *Gramophone* Collections, too. (I was delightedly taken aback to find mention of my own 2002 Collection on *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*.) The author also reveals many delectable nuggets that Heyman overlooks. I didn't know that both Celibidache and Furtwängler conducted the *Adagio for Strings* after the war, or that Furtwängler would have conducted the *Second Essay* at a planned 1955 concert by the Berlin Philharmonic in London had he not died in late 1954, so instead the *Second Essay* was played by the RPO under Beecham.

That Pollack's book owes a debt of gratitude to Heyman's is without question. My dog-eared copy of the first edition of her biography can attest to its value, and the new edition is more valuable still. That Pollack found a way to give us an equally illuminating alternative view is cause for celebration. **Andrew Farach-Colton**

Song & Self

A Singer's Reflections on Music and Performance
By Ian Bostridge
Faber & Faber, HB, 128pp, £14.99
ISBN 978-0-571-37899-9

After his last book, the magisterial *Schubert's Winter's Journey* (Faber & Faber: 2015 – 4/15), Ian Bostridge's *Song & Self* might seem somewhat slight, something closer to his *A Singer's Notebook* (Faber & Faber: 2011). But the tenor is open about his ambitions – or lack thereof – for his new book, which presents thoughts first delivered as the Berlin Family Lectures at the University of Chicago. 'They remain essays,' he says in the preface: 'provisional, experimental, suggestive. They do not set out a thesis; they have no agenda. Improvisatory rather than systematically theorised, they aim to reveal or underline complexity, to add texture, to problematise.'

They also, he adds, draw heavily on his own experience as a performer, a fact that dictates the choices of works discussed. And indeed, throughout the slim volume, one relishes the special skill-set Bostridge brings to his task: a performer with a background in academic history. His reading is broad, his method as a writer a rewarding mixture of artistic imagination and professorial rigour; his prose is clear, unafraid to clarify and reiterate (although the text still bears traces of the essays' origins, some of which might have been eliminated with some extra editing). The preface alone, with its beautifully economical and lucid account of the key questions of what performance should be in relation to the score, makes the book worth picking up.

The three chapters that follow are fascinating, too. The first, 'Blurring Identities', addresses the issue of 'Gender in Performance', with musical examples ranging from Monteverdi (*Il combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*) to Schumann and Britten. And initially one wonders how the writer is going to tie it all together. 'Robert Schumann's song-cycle for voice and piano, *Frauenliebe und -leben*, is a very different beast from Monteverdi's *Combattimento*,' he writes, with more than a hint of non sequitur at the start of the chapter's second section. But tie them together he does, addressing the issues raised by each work, outlining broader contexts and throwing in choice titbits of research.

An examination of Robert and Clara Schumann's letters, for example, is used to demonstrate how, far from expecting Clara to play the servile wife as presented in *Frauenliebe und -leben*, Robert often imagined himself in this role. Bostridge reminds us, too, that the cycle's poet, Adelbert von Chamisso, was far from reactionary, attempting – however misguidedly it might seem to modern readers – with these verses and others written from the female point of view 'to make space for a female perspective in a poetic economy starved of female experience'. Thus the cross-dressing of the Monteverdi is linked, via Schumann, to the cross-dressing of Britten's *Curlew River*, in which the composer borrowed from a centuries-old tradition of Japanese theatre while simultaneously recasting his source play as a Christian parable.

There's a similar richness of detail in Bostridge's in-depth discussion of Ravel's *Chansons madécasses*, and more specifically the rousing, anti-colonialist second song, 'Aoua'. He examines both the context of its premiere and the context of the original poem, which takes us back through the centuries to various French attempts to colonise Madagascar and positions Évariste Parny, the cycle's poet, within that complex history. The result is a fascinating exploration of the grey areas within that history, and especially of the conflicted position that such apparent progressives as Parny occupied within it. This in turn leads to speculations about Ravel's own private attitude towards colonialism, which might stand in contrast to his aloof public image.

The themes of private and public image are central, too, to the final chapter, a richly rewarding exploration of music Britten wrote in reaction to the horrors of the Second World War. The private is here represented by *The Holy Sonnets of John Donne*, composed in 1945; the public is represented by the *War Requiem*. Bostridge weaves the works together by means of Britten's aborted setting of Donne's 'Meditation' from the *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (best known for including the phrase 'for whom the bell tolls'), before moving on to a final discussion of *Death in Venice*, composed by Britten when his own mortality was very much on his mind. It provides a sombre, moving conclusion – and Bostridge even manages to link us back, in a pleasing touch, to Monteverdi's *Combattimento*, via a photo of Britten on his last trip to Venice.

This is a fascinating little book, then, even if one occasionally wonders if the 'provisional, experimental, suggestive' approach is enough. Certainly, there are times when one wants to know what conclusions Bostridge draws from his explorations. At the same time, though, one has to respect his willingness to keep things open-ended. And after all, many of the questions he leaves open – especially in a world where so many of the issues he addresses are in a state of constant flux – are maybe best left unanswered for now. **Hugo Shirley**

PHOTOGRAPHY: TULLY POTTER/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

THE GRAMOPHONE COLLECTION

Vaughan Williams's Concerto for Oboe and Strings

Vaughan Williams's 1944 Concerto for oboe and strings is one of few such works to maintain a foothold in the repertoire. **David Threasher** listens to a selection of the available recordings

The oboe concerto as a form fell virtually into oblivion between Mozart's coming-of-age and the height of the Second World War. After the Salzburger's sole oboe concerto, K314 of 1777 – long better known in a version for flute – the Romantics all but abandoned concertos for any instruments other than the piano and the violin. Workaday oboe concertos for didactic use continued to emanate piecemeal from the Paris Conservatoire, running alongside developments in the instrument's construction that led the Conservatoire system to be the style of oboe favoured universally by the early years of the last century (at least outside Vienna). Thus armed with a modern, reliable incarnation of the instrument, a new generation of players inspired a string of worthwhile works from a range of composers; but it was Vaughan Williams who emerged in 1944 as the unlikely creator of the work that re-established the oboe concerto as a viable form after its century and a half or more of obscurity. Richard Strauss's Oboe Concerto in D major – the one such work of the period equal in stature to the Vaughan Williams – followed a little over a year later.

Léon Goossens (1897-1988) was the oboist who raised the instrument to renewed prominence in the UK. His expressiveness and artistry, allied to a refined technique and notable sweetness of tone, inspired a string of works beginning with Bax's Oboe Quintet (1922) and including concertos by his brother Eugene (1927) and Gordon Jacob (1933). Even Elgar tried his hand, embarking in 1930 upon a suite of which only a single movement has achieved any currency, albeit in an orchestration by Jacob.

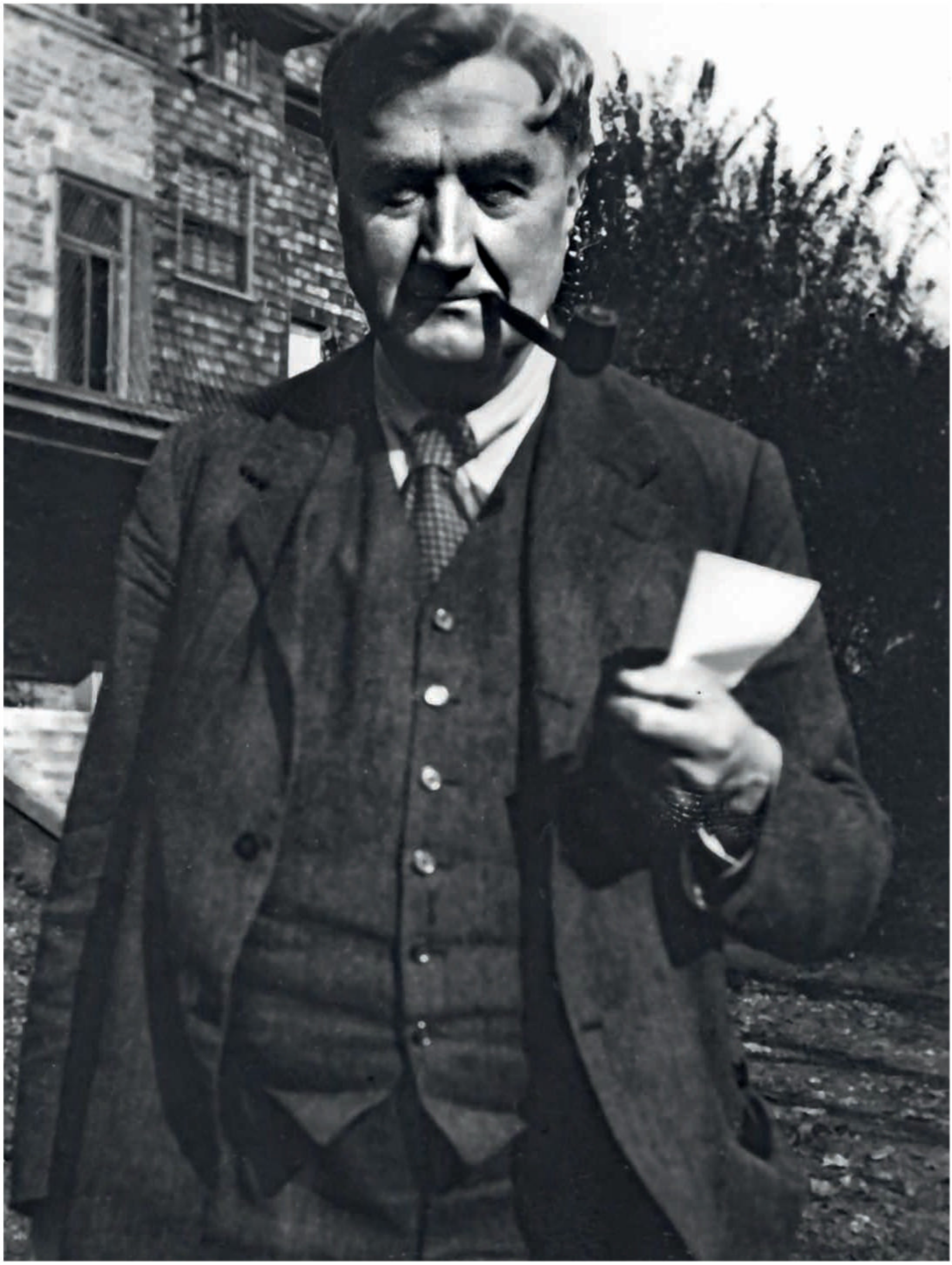
Vaughan Williams started work on an early version of the Concerto in A minor for oboe and strings immediately upon completing the Fifth Symphony in 1943, and indeed putting to good use discarded sketches for the symphony's Scherzo. He offered the concerto to Henry Wood for inclusion in the 1944 Promenade Concerts, recently relocated to the Royal Albert Hall following the bombing of the Queen's Hall. 'I am so sorry for the delay,' wrote the composer, 'which is due to the fact that when I had, as I thought, finished it, I began to re-write it.' Wood initially turned the work down for the Proms, thinking it unsuited to the cavernous Albert Hall and its resonant acoustic, but shortly afterwards changed his mind. In any case, late that June the Luftwaffe had begun bombarding the capital with its new missile, the 'doodlebug' or V-1 flying bomb, meaning that the remainder of the 1944 Proms season had to be abandoned, along with the premiere of the Oboe Concerto, planned for July 5.

The concerto wouldn't in the event make its Proms debut until 1990, in a performance by its most assiduous latter-day champion, Nicholas Daniel. Meanwhile, Goossens gave the belated premiere in Liverpool on September 30, 1944, with the Liverpool Philharmonic under Malcolm Sargent at Philharmonic Hall, in a concert that also included his brother's terse single-movement (and still underestimated) concerto. Goossens recorded the Vaughan Williams at Kingsway Hall in 1952 with the Philharmonia Orchestra under Walter Susskind but this wasn't issued at the time and ultimately appeared on a mono LP as late as 1963, coupled with an oboe d'amore concerto by Bach (HMV, 9/63, 10/77).

Goossens's recording has apparently never been remastered for CD but it is available as an audio transfer on YouTube, demonstrating the traits for which he was renowned, not least a rounded tone enriched by a deep, constant vibrato. His approach to the solo line is free and personal, his rhythm rhapsodic rather than literal, once or twice in the opening movement leading to lapses in ensemble as he leaves Susskind and the Philharmonia standing. His Minuet is impish, his tempo for the scherzo finale more restrained than was to become the norm, although he refuses to linger in the slow episodes.

Nevertheless, his long association with the work is evident in his unassailable command of its somewhat unconventional architecture. The first-movement 'Rondo pastorale' (*Allegro moderato*) opens with a rising pentatonic figure in the strings that is to set the tone for the whole work; over this the soloist enters with the principal melody, which soon gives way to the first of a number of brief cadenzas. A change of mood comes with a jauntier tune (at fig C) that is then supplanted by a more angular staccato figure. Variants of this group of themes – taking in major, minor and modal characteristics – convey the Rondo to its hushed close.

The brief Minuet's outwardly simplistic, almost naive melody masks a harmonic language that delves much deeper than it might on the surface suggest and frames a Musette in which soloist and strings trade drones against a playful backdrop.



PHOTOGRAPHY: VAUGHAN WILLIAMS FOUNDATION

Ralph Vaughan Williams revisited the lyrical and nostalgic tone of the Fifth Symphony in his Concerto for Oboe and Strings

The finale is the longest and most complex of the three movements, the astringent athleticism of its opening scherzo music giving way first to a sustained hymnlike passage before a harmonically unstable transition (fig L) and then, following another cadenza, to an extended slow section heralded by a Hindemith-like sequence of chords for full strings, divided into nine parts and double-stopped, leading to an ecstatic cantilena for the soloist (*Doppio più lento*). A recapitulation of the scherzo music (*Doppio più mosso*) is once more interrupted by a richly scored *Lento* that provides the work's emotional climax – 'one of the rare times when Vaughan Williams exposed his inner personal feelings quite so brazenly', as Michael Kennedy wrote (7/88). After a final return of the movement's opening figures, the rising pentatonic motif from the concerto's opening brings it to a serene conclusion.

Oboist Léon Goossens, whose artistry inspired the concerto

The Oboe Concerto's challenges lie not principally in the technical requirements of negotiating the notes – although it falls by no means easily under the fingers – but in the stamina required to sustain its shifting moods over 19 or 20 minutes with only very few brief opportunities to rest the lips and renew the breath. And Vaughan Williams's demand after all that to close the piece with a top D played *pianissimo* continues to strike fear into oboists. Reviewing the concerto in March 1956, Lionel Salter suggested that 'it may have no particularly memorable themes': as one who battled with it as a young oboe student, I disagree wholeheartedly. The opening melody is unforgettable, the Minuet ingratiating and the climactic *Lento* one of the most heartfelt passages in the oboe repertoire. It can't be just the paucity of concertos for the instrument that continues to draw oboists to it on recordings, gratifyingly featuring a good handful of orchestral principals alongside each generation's oboe superstars – to whatever extent such stars may be considered super in the rarefied double-reed firmament – and increasingly from further afield than the work's native England.

EARLY RECORDINGS

It isn't clear why Goossens's pioneering recording of the concerto waited for more than a decade to be issued but in the meantime his former pupil (at the Royal College of Music) **Evelyn Rothwell** gave the record-buying audience its first chance to hear the work. Her adherence to the solo line is more faithful than her teacher's, resulting in less differentiation of character between sections; her Minuet, too, comes across as a little po-faced in comparison. Rothwell's husband John Barbirolli and the London Symphony Orchestra provide the accompaniment, well-disciplined if a touch bass-light.

Additionally, a few years before Rothwell's recording, **Janet Craxton** performed the concerto in a BBC studio concert (April 11, 1952) recently resurrected by Oboe Classics. Listen beyond the prominent surface noise – a producer's note gives the colourful information that 'the [acetate] discs had to be cleaned of fungus' – and you're treated to the fastest interpretation of all, coming in at a little over 16 minutes. Craxton was at the time principal oboe in Barbirolli's Hallé Orchestra and doesn't share Goossens's depth of vibrato but clearly had her own deeply individual view of a work that was still to a large extent unfamiliar new music – and her efforts were sufficient to secure the subsequent co-dedication, with tenor Wilfred Brown, of Vaughan Williams's *Ten Blake Songs* (1957). This recording of the concerto could never be anyone's library choice but, as that producer's note concludes, 'the interpretation soars'.

INTO THE SEVENTIES

Goossens's recording held its ground for over a decade following its belated appearance in 1963 but three subsequent recordings that have maintained a place in the discography emerged over the space of just a few years in the second half of the 1970s. **John Williams** was the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra's principal oboist and offers a slightly less forceful performance of the solo line, with playing that comes across in places as gently musing where others may be more assertive. Nevertheless, even without

A HIDDEN GEM

David Theodore; LSO / Bryden Thomson
Chandos ② CHAN9262/3

Chandos has replaced much of its earlier Vaughan Williams catalogue with newer recordings but this 1988 performance of the concerto is not surpassed by its successor, for all that the rest of the set

doesn't maintain such a high standard. David Theodore lavishes silky tone on the solo line and Bryden Thomson's LSO provide solid support.

THE VIEW FROM ABROAD

Lajos Lencsés; Budapest Stgs / Béla Bánfalvi
Capriccio C5035

Vaughan Williams's music once laboured under the cliché that it didn't 'travel' well but recordings such as this demonstrate the wrong-headedness of such opinions. For all their 'old world' sensibilities, the

Hungarian strings sound as if they were born to play English music, and Lajos Lencsés shapes the solo line instinctively and tastefully.

A CLOSE SECOND CHOICE

Stéphane Rancourt; Hallé Orch / Mark Elder
Hallé CDHLL7529

The Hallé's principal oboist impresses with his care for characterisation and a comprehension of the work's trajectory that is rarely equalled. Mark Elder's Hallé strings provide an accompaniment that

is remarkable for its richness and concern for detail. The heavenly *Lento* at the work's climax is just one among many breathtaking moments.

taking Goossens's rhythmic liberties, Williams brings out the playfulness of the finale. Advances in recording techniques mean that the subtle craftsmanship of Vaughan Williams's voice-leading can be heard with renewed clarity in the inner lines of the string accompaniment. If the Philharmonia and the LSO emphasised the kinship between the concerto and the Fifth Symphony, the Bournemouth orchestra's full-bodied tone also brings to mind the folkish sound world of the *Greensleeves* Fantasia.

Daniel Barenboim's English Chamber Orchestra offer truly high-class string-playing for **Neil Black** (in 1975 the ECO's principal oboist), with bigger bass and an almost mystical halo around the orchestral sound. Black's vibrato-light tone is ideally focused throughout and Barenboim's shaping of the accompaniment is exquisite, even if some rhythmic inflexibility in the final movement prevents the music from breathing as it might in the faster sections. The Academy of St Martin in the Fields and Neville Marriner are recorded more spaciously and with slightly less presence for **Celia Nicklin**, Black's successor as Academy principal, who contrasts a halting, enigmatic Minuet with a fleet-footed finale that captures its quicksilver qualities, turning almost menacing in the run-up to the first cadenza (just before the *Doppio più lento*). And her final *pianissimo* top D is delectable.

Hallé principal Stéphane Rancourt's recording offers uncommonly fine characterisation

THE DIGITAL ERA

Few recordings manage completely to disguise the audible evidence of oboe-playing – snatched breaths and the clicking of the instrument's keywork. Trevor Harvey found additionally that **Maurice Bourgue** was too closely recorded by Nimbus, his playing 'mostly insensitive and loud'. This recording long had a reputation for the continual clack of Bourgue's keys, which, when accompanied with efficiency rather than imagination by the English String Orchestra in the mushy acoustic of the Great Hall of Birmingham University, makes for a less than attractive option. TH considered Bourgue 'not in sympathy with this piece', and the oboist's rhythmic rigidity and under-characterised climactic *Lento* would appear to support this view. **Roger Winfield** is more attuned to the flow of the work, his long-breathed *cantabile* in the Rondo adding half a minute to Bourgue's timing. Richard Hickox matches Barbirolli in shaping the accompaniment *con amore*. Like Nicklin, Winfield opts for something more subdued and equivocal in the Minuet and the finale's *Lento* is beautifully done, although some of the faster music in the outer movements suffers from minor ensemble lapses.

David Theodore displays some gorgeous *pianissimo* playing, albeit counterbalanced by an occasional reluctance fully to exploit *fortes* and *fortissimos* in the Rondo. He restores a sense of buoyancy to the Minuet and responds to the finale's shifts of mood without resorting to extremes of tempo – the *Doppio più lento* is ravishingly sustained. His consistently silky, even tone marks this performance out as something of a hidden gem among a collection of Vaughan Williams's concertante works with Bryden Thomson and the LSO that is otherwise of rather variable quality. **Julia Girdwood** matches Theodore's richness of tone in a performance characterised by brisk tempos and slightly perfunctory accompaniment from Robert Haydon Clark's Consort of London.

Jonathan Small, in 1990 the RLPO's principal oboist, demonstrates that a go-ahead tempo for the Rondo need not preclude the mood of 'pastoral contemplation' identified by Michael Jameson in his review. The finale receives a performance of notable virtuosity and architectural cogency, aided by the unerring instincts in this music of Vernon Handley. Small's rapid vibrato and reedy tone contrast with Theodore's creamier sound and he is recorded more spaciously, the Liverpool strings less full-throated than,

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

1952	**Janet Craxton**; Hallé Orch / **John Barbirolli**	Oboe Classics CC2311
1955	**Evelyn Rothwell**; LSO / **John Barbirolli**	Warner Classics 566543-2 (3/56); Barbirolli Society ② SJB1045/6
1974	**John Williams**; Bournemouth SO / **Paavo Berglund**	Warner Classics ② 216146-2 (10/75)
1975	**Neil Black**; ECO / **Daniel Barenboim**	DG 419 748-2GH; 439 529-2GGA (2/78, 4/94); Eloquence ELQ442 8333
1977	**Celia Nicklin**; ASMF / **Neville Marriner**	Decca ② 460 357-2DF2 (9/79)
1985	**Maurice Bourgue**; English Stg Orch / **William Boughton**	Nimbus NI7013; ④ NI1754 (6/85)
1987	**Roger Winfield**; Northern Sinf / **Richard Hickox**	Warner Classics ② 573986-2 (7/88)
1988	**David Theodore**; LSO / **Bryden Thomson**	Chandos ② CHAN9262/3 (8/88, 8/94)
1990	**Julia Girdwood**; Consort of London / **Robert Haydon Clark**	Collins Classics 11402 (10/91)
1990	**Jonathan Small**; RLPO / **Vernon Handley**	Classics for Pleasure 575311-2 (12/91)
2003	**Ruth Bolister**; Elgar CO / **Stephen Bell**	Resonance CDRSB505 (4/04)
2006	**Lajos Lencsés**; Budapest Stgs / **Béla Bánfalvi**	Capriccio C5035
2010	**Emily Pailthorpe**; ECO / **Benjamin Wallfisch**	Champs Hill CHRCD025 (3/12)
2010	**Stéphane Rancourt**; Hallé Orch / **Mark Elder**	Hallé CDHLL7529 (1/12)
2014	**Nicholas Daniel**; Britten Sinf	Harmonia Mundi HMU80 7573 (5/15)
2017	**Sarah Jeffrey**; Toronto SO / **Peter Oundjian**	Chandos CHSA5201 (8/18)
2019	**Martin Daněk**; Prague SO / **Pavel Peřina**	Arco Diva UP0233

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Emily Pailthorpe, acutely sensitive to the details of Vaughan Williams's score

say, Marriner's ASMF or Thomson's LSO. For the creamiest tone so far, though – and for strings played in the 'old world' style that happily lingered in Eastern Europe – turn to the veteran Hungarian player **Lajos Lencsés** and the Budapest Strings under Béla Bánfalvi. This is a beautifully shaped performance and a reading of notable fidelity to the score. If *pianissimos* don't seem ideally hushed, that is the result of a closely miked recording rather than any reluctance on the part of the soloist.

Ruth Bolister's performance comes across as rather matter-of-fact in comparison – although the Minuet receives a charmingly perky performance – with a plain-speaking accompaniment from the Elgar Chamber Orchestra under Stephen Bell. Her disc is valuable, nevertheless, for taking in the principal works for oboe and orchestra inspired by Léon Goossens: the Vaughan Williams, Eugene Goossens and Gordon Jacob concertos, and Jacob's orchestration of Elgar's *Soliloquy*, the surviving shard from his planned suite.

RECENT RECORDINGS

Not surprisingly, the pace of recording activity has picked up over the past couple of decades, at least as far as Vaughan Williams's Oboe Concerto is concerned. Of two recordings made within a few months of each other in 2010, **Emily Pailthorpe**'s displays an acute sensitivity to *piano* and *pianissimo* markings, the oboe treated in the mix as part of the ensemble rather than spotlit as the soloist, giving a true feeling of chamber music-making. If the ECO under Benjamin Wallfisch sound disappointingly thin in places – a far cry from their glory days under Barenboim – the reading is nonetheless crowned by Pailthorpe's perfect closing top D. A matter of months later, **Stéphane Rancourt** stepped out from his principal's chair with the Hallé Orchestra for a studio recording of uncommonly fine characterisation. The evident care taken over such moments as the change of mood at fig C is a case in point, as is the sublimely sustained *Lento* in the finale. The well-upholstered accompaniment under Mark Elder is artfully shaped and minutely observed.

Nicholas Daniel recorded the concerto in 2014 with the Britten Sinfonia, a highlight of his career-long association with the work. It was with the Vaughan Williams that Daniel triumphed in the final of the second BBC Young Musician of the Year competition in 1980 and his links with it extended to his being the soloist not only at the work's eventual Proms premiere (with the City of London Sinfonia under Hickox on August 8, 1990, more than 46 years after being originally programmed) but also at its second Proms performance – last year, with the Royal Northern Sinfonia under Dinis Sousa. Such unparalleled experience gives rise to a recording of unsurpassed authority: everything feels as if it has simply dropped into the right place, with nothing seeming forced. Daniel is more measured than some, for example, as the music builds in animation at fig C, and there is a rare sense of ecstasy to the *Lento* as the finale reaches its apogee. Andrew Achenbach praised Daniel's 'flawless discipline, liquid tone, exquisite chiaroscuro and seemingly superhuman breath control', which just about says it all.

Following Rancourt and Daniel, the recording by **Sarah Jeffrey** with the Toronto SO under Peter Oundjian comes across as less gripping, for all Chandos's widescreen sound in a large, atmospheric hall. **Martin Daněk** took first prize at the 2019 Prague Spring Competition performing the Vaughan Williams alongside Martinů's 1955 Concerto, with his winning performances appearing shortly afterwards on disc. There is much audience noise but Daněk is clearly an able and charismatic soloist, and the Prague Symphony Orchestra under Pavel Peřina are enthusiastically responsive to the idiom, although a studio recording might have occasioned a greater degree of coordination and refinement.

THE FINAL CHOICE

Vaughan Williams's Oboe Concerto has fared reasonably well on recordings, given its position slightly away from the centre of the repertoire and the difficulty of programming a 20-minute concertante work in performance. Few of the readings considered above will disappoint, although Janet Craxton's is unlikely to appeal beyond her admirers and those interested in older performance styles, and Martin Daněk's makes one look forward to recordings that more effectively display his abilities as his career blossoms from this promising start.

The one recording that stands out above all others comes perhaps unsurprisingly from today's pre-eminent British oboist, Nicholas Daniel – the only soloist to direct the performance without the assistance of a conductor. He is almost matched in sensitivity and style by the Hallé's Stéphane Rancourt and, in a rather older recording, David Theodore with the LSO. And for the view from abroad, Lajos Lencsés demonstrates that Vaughan Williams remains just as relevant to receptive musicians and audiences beyond his native shores. G

THE TOP CHOICE

Nicholas Daniel; Britten Sinfonia
Harmonia Mundi SUPER AUDIO CD HMU80 7573

A career-long association with the concerto makes Nicholas Daniel the ideal soloist. The authority with which the work's challenges are surmounted, along with Daniel's flowing virtuosity and buttery tone, make this an unforgettable performance. He inspires the Britten Sinfonia to give an architecturally cohesive and elegantly contoured accompaniment. Beautiful surround sound from Harmonia Mundi further adds to the attraction.

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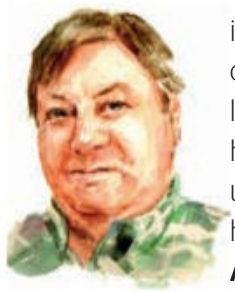

THIS MONTH A 'system in speakers' design from an old American manufacturer leads into a guide to buying highly integrated audio set-ups; and have we forgotten how to listen?
Andrew Everard, Audio Editor

JUNE TEST RECORDINGS

A wonderfully spacious recording complements these live performances by pianist Yuja Wang: the music may be unfamiliar, but the sound is scintillating

A former *Gramophone* Recording of the Month, this rich, sumptuous recording of *Turandot* is as sonically rewarding as it is striking in its performances

ESSAY

The best seat in the house?

From the hubbub in a show demonstration room to wariness about the auditioning process, are we falling out of love with active listening?

Don't be afraid to audition new equipment in the same way that you would listen at home

Either as a sign of normality returning or a spot of Groundhog Day, I deduce from a spate of messages asking me how one should go about choosing a new system that people are getting back into the habit of improving how they listen to their music. Times may be tough out there, but it seems many want a better set-up to play their favourites, whether they be on LP or CD, or streamed from online services or local storage.

And yet … I was dismayed at a recent hi-fi show, where I'd assumed attendees would be there to listen, at the high level of conversation going on when music was being played. I can safely say I didn't sit in one room where there wasn't at least one chat being had in the rows in front of me, while in one big demonstration room I was sufficiently distracted by the hubbub that I stopped listening to the music, and counted the number of conversations going on around me. There were nine at one point, and a rolling programme of new dialogues as some left the room and others entered.

I came to two conclusions, both of which are equally troubling, depending on your view of how you interact with music: either this kind of social interaction is what goes on when some people are listening to music, just as there's a constant drone of conversation in cinemas these days, or we've forgotten how to listen.

I've set out my stall on this one before: while it's clear a hi-fi show demonstration is no place in which to make a purchasing decision, I find it very hard to listen to music and do anything else, let alone hold a simultaneous conversation, to the extent that as I type this I'm listening not to a new release, but speech radio. Just me? Maybe, but I know that of late when I have tried to play music to visitors and friends, it doesn't take long before I'm turning down the level as they begin to chat.

Maybe it's an attention-span thing: perhaps the instant-gratification thing of streamed music, fast food and social media means many are now disinclined to listen to a whole track, let alone a complete album. I know some younger listeners of my acquaintance seem to switch between tracks after what seems like just a few moments, although to be fair the similarity of so much of what they consume can sometimes make the 'joins' tricky to spot unless you're paying attention – which I'm not sure they are.

Now I'm aware that I'm sounding like something of a grumpy old whatsit here, but a couple of recent emails had me wondering whether the whole idea of 'active listening' is passing into the mists of history, and the days of sitting down to listen to music – and just listening – are for many as much of an anachronism as getting dressed in one's finery to attend a concert or theatrical performance. True, I'm glad white tie and tails are no longer required, but when I listen, I like to listen – otherwise fine recordings and high-quality hi-fi seem to be wasted.

Those emails covered two aspects of a common theme when it came to auditioning hi-fi before buying: one asked, 'Do I really need to listen before I buy?' and the other, 'What do I need to do when I go for a demonstration?'. The first is easy to answer in the affirmative, but both speak to the idea that auditioning is in some way a daunting process – an opinion I've encountered throughout the four decades I've been reviewing and advising on audio systems.

Yes, it's slightly harder to find a decent hi-fi retailer than it was years ago, simply because there are fewer around these days, but my answer is the same as I've always given: find one with a room in which you can listen, take your own music, and listen to whatever you are thinking of buying in the way you think you'll be listening at home, whether that's whisper-quiet solo violin, obscure choral music or orchestral recordings at 'eve of destruction' levels. Think of it like buying clothes: you want something in which you'll feel comfortable – not restrictively tight or seemingly three sizes too big and in lime green, because 'that's the fashion these days.'

Then take it home, set it up, sit back – and enjoy the music.

Klipsch The Nines

They may be described as 'Heritage Inspired', but these powered speakers offer a very up-to-date specification, making them a complete audio system

KLIPSCH THE NINES

Type Two-way powered speaker system
Price £1899/pr
Drivers 25mm tweeter with Tractrix horn, 20.3cm fibre composite cone mid/bass
Amplifier power (per channel) 20W tweeter, 100W mid/bass
Digital inputs Optical, USB-B, HDMI-ARC, Bluetooth with aptX/aptX HD
Analogue inputs 3.5mm stereo, RCA line-in switchable to MM phono
Analogue output Mono subwoofer
Other connections USB service port, 4-pin connection between speakers
Control Via top panel source/volume on main speaker, remote handset or Klipsch Connect app
Accessories supplied Remote handset, USB and HDMI cables, 4-core connector between speakers (4m + 2m extension)
Finishes Walnut, black
Dimensions (WxHxD) 48.6x24.1x34cm
klipsch.com

The hi-fi industry is currently going through a period of nostalgia: perhaps inspired by the renaissance of the record player in recent years, or just the fact that so many companies are reaching significant birthdays, we're seeing all kinds of 'heritage' designs, reviving the icons and style of the past, but imbuing them with modern technologies and production methods.

We've seen IAG – no stranger to its brands' heritage, with its re-imagined Leak and Quad models of recent years – bringing back classic Mission and Wharfedale loudspeaker models, and proudly announcing that production has been brought back to Britain, in the form of an assembly facility in Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire, while brands such as JBL and NAD have launched electronics harking back to past designs, again marking significant anniversaries.

Klispch, too, while now owned by international company Voxx, has also been casting its eye to the past for some time, with models such as the massive AK6 loudspeaker, a reinvention of the original Klipschorn speaker developed and handbuilt, legend has it in an Arkansas tin shed, by company founder Paul W Klipsch – described by the company as 'genius, madman and maverick' – in the mid-1940s. The AK6, standing 1.32m tall and weighing 100kg, is unashamedly retro in its design, complete with its trio of drivers – including a massive 38.1cm bass unit – loaded with horns, and is still made in the traditional way: by hand, in Hope, Arkansas.

It's part of the company's Heritage Premium range, which has also inspired ranges of wireless powered speakers combining very much up-to-date technology with the ideas Klipsch developed almost 80 years back. Indeed, The Nines speakers here, like the smaller The Sevens and The Fives model, are available in a decidedly retro walnut finish with light-coloured grilles, giving them a very 1970s look. Mind you, they look a lot more contemporary in the optional all-black colourway, and there's also a McLaren edition of the speakers celebrating racing driver and F1 team founder Bruce McLaren, complete with a metal grille and a flash in the car company's Papaya Orange, emblazoned with McLaren's racing number 5.

Ignore the blandishments of that limited edition model and the standard version of The Nines, selling for £1849/pr, is about as understated as a 48.5cm-tall bookshelf/standmount speaker could be. Within there's a 2.5cm titanium dome tweeter for high frequencies, set deep in one of Klipsch's Tractrix horns, while the mid/bass is delivered by a long-throw 20.3cm driver, tuned with a rear-venting port. Like many a speaker system of this kind, the Klipsch houses all its electronics in one of the speakers – including 100W mid/bass amplification and 20W high-frequency for each channel, with the second speaker being a passive design, connected via a four-conductor speaker cable. This also has the advantage of only requiring one mains cable, to supply the primary speaker, and the speakers come complete with a 4m cable to connect the two, plus a 2m extension if that's required, while a switch on the rear of the main speaker allows you to designate it as either the left or right channel.

However, that on-board amplification is just the start of what The Nines offer, as is clear from the inputs available on that main speaker: as well as the invisible Bluetooth capability, which has aptX/aptX HD capability, the speaker has both USB Type B input for connection to a computer and an optical digital in, along with an HDMI-ARC (Audio Return Channel) port

SUGGESTED PARTNERS

With virtually everything included in the speakers, here are some ideas to make the most of The Nines

ATACAMA NEXUS 500S
If you're putting the speakers on stands, these 50cm Atacama NeXus 500s would be suitable: opt for the larger 16x20cm top-plates

MAC MINI
Use The Nines with a computer, controlled remotely to stream music: the latest Mac Mini would be a good choice

to enable sound from a TV set to be input, with both USB-A-to-USB-B and HDMI cables supplied. The analogue inputs run to a 3.5mm stereo mini-jack and a single set of RCA sockets, the latter switchable between line-in, for example for a CD player, and moving magnet phono for a record player. There's also a mono output should you wish to add a subwoofer.

They simply get on with the job of delivering a weighty, detailed and entirely captivating sound, and do so with minimal fuss

So, in a single pair of speakers, we have everything to please everyone from vinyl enthusiasts to those who access their music via a computer or smartphone/tablet, and yet The Nines go even further, with built-in digital signal processing to optimise their sound, with Dynamic EQ to enhance the bass when the speakers are playing at low volume. This can be disabled if required, while custom equalisation can be set up, and the speakers controlled, using the free Klipsch Connect app on a phone or tablet, where you can also run the Klipsch The Fives Updater to ensure the speakers are running the latest software.

If you'd rather be more hands-on, the speakers come complete with a more traditional remote handset, and have source and volume adjustment on high-quality knurled metal controls set into the top panel of the main speaker. This control panel adds to the sense of luxury delivered by the real-wood veneers on the speakers, which also feel solid and rigid, while the use of magnetic grilles leaves a clean finish when you remove the covers to reveal that dramatic-looking horn. For use on shelves, the speakers sit on cork feet.

PERFORMANCE

Used without the grilles, The Nines may look rather retro-studio-oriented with their 'Established 1946 USA' legend between the two drivers, but there's nothing old-fashioned about their sound. They're uncommonly big and powerful speakers for what are, after all, bookshelf/standmount designs, and there are no apparent performance trade-offs for their 'system in a pair of speakers' appeal: they simply get on with the job of delivering a weighty, detailed and entirely captivating sound, and do so with minimal fuss.

The Nines quickly dispel any doubts about the ability of a system like this to challenge a more conventional 'amplifier and speakers' set-up: whether streaming Apple Music from a phone or playing high-resolution music (up to 192kHz/24bit) from a computer over USB, they deliver compelling power and resolution, plus an attractive sense of soundstage scale and focus thanks to that Klipsch-designed tweeter system.

Indeed, the two drivers here are remarkably well integrated, and with the speakers just a little way from the wall behind them, the bass is both extended and tightly controlled, really bringing out the weight of a full orchestra, while at the same time giving solo piano suitable depth in the lower octaves, while still conveying all the character and speed further to the right. They're similarly accomplished with other solo instruments and voices, with fine insight into timbre and technique, and have no problem revealing the component parts of small-ensemble recordings.

These speakers do that refreshing thing of being as easy to listen to as they are to use, while rewarding close attention with a real in-depth view of the music. They're thoroughly recommended. G

Or you could try ...

Active or powered speakers are a growth area at the moment, and justifiably popular as a convenient, compact audio system, able to be streamed to with a phone, or connected to computers or other sources.

Ruark MR1 Mk2

The Ruark MR1 Mk2 is a highly affordable desktop solution, with Bluetooth onboard and both USB and analogue inputs, and would also be ideal used with a TV to improve the sound of your viewing. Find out more at **ruarkaudio.com**

KEF LSX II

The LSX II is the smallest and most affordable of KEF's 'system in a speaker' models, combining the company's two-in-one Uni-Q drive unit with built-in amplification under DSP control and an integrated streaming platform with app control. Connect it to your wireless network and you have a complete audio system, as you can read at **kef.com**

Dali Oberon 1C

The Oberon 1C offers a different take on the active idea: the speakers themselves, just 27cm tall, have 2x50W of built-in amplification, and connect wirelessly to the included Sound Hub Compact, which has Bluetooth built-in, and into which source components can be connected via digital, HDMI and analogue inputs. For all the details, see **dali-speakers.com**

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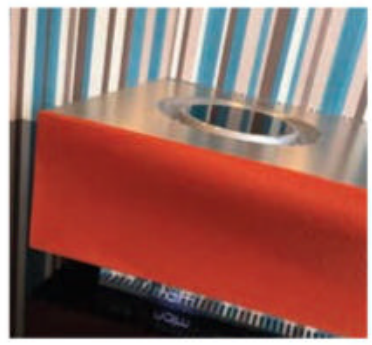

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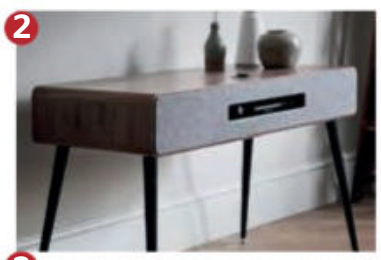
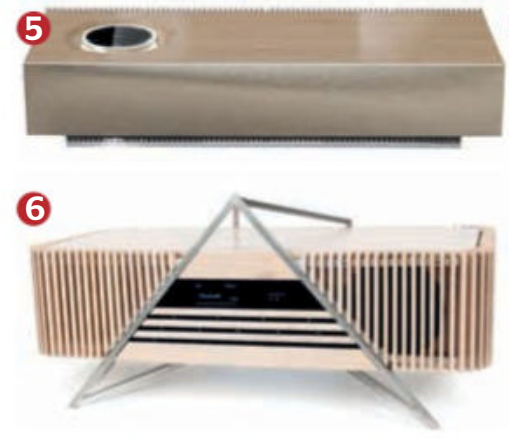
THE GRAMOPHONE GUIDE TO ...

All-in-one audio systems

The days of the old radiograms and music centres may be past, but there's no shortage of ideas for compact, high-performance hi-fi – it can save space and is easy to use, too





It wasn't long after the rise of the gramophone as a domestic music source that the first integrated audio systems appeared. By the 1930s, when *Gramophone* was still in its teens, the first combined radio/record-playing units – or radiograms – started to appear, and in the post-war period the sideboard-shaped music player, complete with radio, often an autochanger record deck, amplification and speakers was hugely popular, especially as we moved into the stereo age.

We can probably all remember a relative who had one of them, from ornate French polished models to sleeker designs in the lighter woods of the Scandinavian furniture trend, and for many of us the valve-powered family radiogram may well have been where we played our first records all those years ago. Yet with the arrival of solid-state amplification and more ways to play music, many radiograms found their way to jumble sales or the local tip, replaced by acrylic-lidded music centres complete with turntable, cassette deck and radio tuner, supplied complete with separate stereo speakers. These days there's still some interest in radiograms as 'vintage pieces', but they're hardly covetable: you can buy one in working condition for under £50 and at the time of writing even an unrestored Braun model, designed by the great Dieter Rams, could be found online for less than £100.

Yet as this month's review of the Klipsch The Nines speakers shows (page 108), the idea has never really gone away, even though it's changed beyond all recognition. The range starts with Klipsch's The Fives, 1 a compact pair of active speakers standing just over 30cm tall, yet capable of playing music from your phone, from a computer or even from a TV using 160W of amplification built into each speaker, and all controlled from a simple app.

In a completely different form, but as similar in concept to an old radiogram as you could find, the remarkable Ruark R7 2 was a slender, table-like design described as 'the radiogram reimagined': complete with those very 1950s spindly tapered legs, but with fully up-to-date features – CD, radio and streaming, plus amplification and speakers all built-in.

Launched in 2014, it reached Mk3 status before, sadly, component supply problems have caused it to be discontinued, although we're promised a replacement later this year: for now, the company offers the smaller, but fine-sounding Ruark R5 model, 3 a table-top version of the same thinking, still in the same choice of real wood or lacquer finished. It also has the same range of capabilities, plus the ability to sync with other R Series models, and the MRx wireless speakers, to expand into a full cable-free multiroom system.

That multiroom capability has been a feature of the Naim Mu-so range 4 since it was launched in 2014 as a low, sleek and wide 'soundbar' design complete with integrated streaming, Bluetooth and more, hugely powerful amplification and a speaker array developed in conjunction with partner Focal behind its interchangeable grilles – all under the control of Naim's excellent app. It's proved highly influential in Naim thinking: a year after the launch, the original Mu-so was joined by the smaller, square Mu-so Qb model, the two turning into 2nd Generation versions with enhanced amplification and speakers in 2019, and special editions appearing more recently.

A Bentley Special Edition appeared in 2020 to reflect Naim's audio systems for the car manufacturer, and a Wood Edition was launched in 2021 5. Meanwhile the large, illuminated volume control became part of the company's flagship Statement preamplifier, and appears again on the latest New Classic NSC 222 streaming preamplifier, the streaming platform of Mu-so has now migrated into a wide range of Naim network products, and of course that white logo, replacing the traditional green ones, has become more prevalent. And with Naim marking its 50th anniversary this year, who knows what we may see from this top-selling all-in-one range?

Not to be outdone, another British manufacturer has its own 'all-in-one' style statement: the iFi Audio Aurora looks like nothing else on the market, 6 finished in slatted bamboo influenced by modern Japanese architecture, and 'floating' on a triangular metal frame. And it's just as unusual inside: as well as streaming network music and supporting Bluetooth and AirPlay, it has multiple drive-units to create a room-filling sound, and a unique acoustic measurement system able to work out where the unit is placed, and tailor its sound accordingly. It's a striking, and superb-sounding, system.

But if you want your all-in-one to at least look like a high-end hi-fi system, look no further than the KEF LS60 flagship wireless speaker system 7. Housed in a pair of slender floorstanding speakers, just 13cm wide and particularly striking in the Royal Blue finish option – you can also have white or Titanium Grey – is a full streaming system. It's able to play network music, online services and more, as well as accepting inputs via digital and analogue connections, HDMI from a TV, Bluetooth Apple AirPlay 2, Chromecast and Roon, all controlled by the KEF Connect app. And with 700W of amplification for each channel, plus the company's acclaimed driver technology, listening to these speakers truly convinces that one might just be listening to the future of hi-fi … G

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Thomas Bangalter

The former member of electronic music duo Daft Punk on writing his ballet Mythologies

My mother was a ballet dancer, one of the dancers at the founding of the Ballet-Théâtre Contemporain, the national contemporary dance company that started in 1968. So being surrounded by dancers, choreographers and this atmosphere, was my first confrontation with classical music. I started piano lessons when I was six, and my teacher was the pianist for the ballet rehearsals at the Paris opera – he was almost a character from another era.

My first memories of symphonic music were through films. When I was three or four years old, my parents had this old video recorder and they would play Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, Chaplin having written the music along with David Raksin, and I was fond of this very lyrical and sweet symphonic music. And my grandparents on my father's side had this ritual that they would do with my father when he was a child, one that we continued, which was on Christmas Eve to listen almost religiously to Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto.

I stopped piano classes around 12 – I don't think I had the discipline, and I don't think I was playing particularly well, although I realise now that as soon as I stopped the lessons I kept on going towards the piano and improvising or writing music and ideas. But I'm a really poor player, and for this ballet project I decided to actually not write it on the piano – I've written a lot of music, pop songs and things, on the piano before, but they were usually just four or eight chord loops. Here I didn't want to be limited by this idea, so I wrote it directly on the score.

Angelin Preljocaj [the choreographer] approached me and asked if I was interested in the idea of writing a ballet. It was definitely my first time writing for the orchestra per se. I had worked with orchestras in the past but always with orchestrators and arrangers. That was what was the most appealing part of this invitation, to really delve into this process and to crack this code of what writing for an orchestra is.

I must say that I was very scared and reluctant initially. I went to Bordeaux to meet the company and visit the theatre – which was built in 1780, so has a soul of its own, and this was the first source of inspiration for me when I considered what kind of music I would want to hear, or would want to write to be performed, in that place. Then I said I'm going to go away and experiment, and will come back in a few months with some sketches – I wanted to make sure that we were on the same page, as the last thing I would want is to work on a project where we would have a different perspective, a blind date which would not lead to a common vision. So at this point, before writing a note, I opened Rimsky-Korsakov and Berlioz's treatises and spent about six months delving deeply into them, and listening to a lot of music. There's about 90 minutes of music in the final work, but I initially wrote about 20 sketches of 1 minute each.

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Vienna PO / Bernstein DG
It's one of the Mozart records that I listened to the most as a child with my parents, so it brings really fond melodies. I love Bernstein as both a composer, and as a transmitter of music as conductor.

I'm aware of references in the music, but they're spontaneous and instinctive. From the start I liked the idea of something that would sometimes be quite minimal and at other moments anti-minimal, almost, and to have these colours co-existing – sometimes being quite simple harmonically and other times quite dissonant. Angelin had an initial desire for it to involve some electric elements, but I was pretty anxious to have to confront myself with the orchestra as a whole, and to create a work that would not involve amplification or electricity. And philosophically, at a time when electricity is the basis of the technology that we live with now, I thought it would be an interesting opportunity for me to create music without the use of machines – music that could have been performed 100 years ago, and could be performed many hundreds of years from now. I've written melodies and harmonies for 30 years but the orchestra is definitely a different beast, so I went in with humility, ready for the accidents and surprises I'd face.

Mythologies, recorded with the Orchestre National Bordeaux Aquitaine and Romain Dumas, is available on Erato

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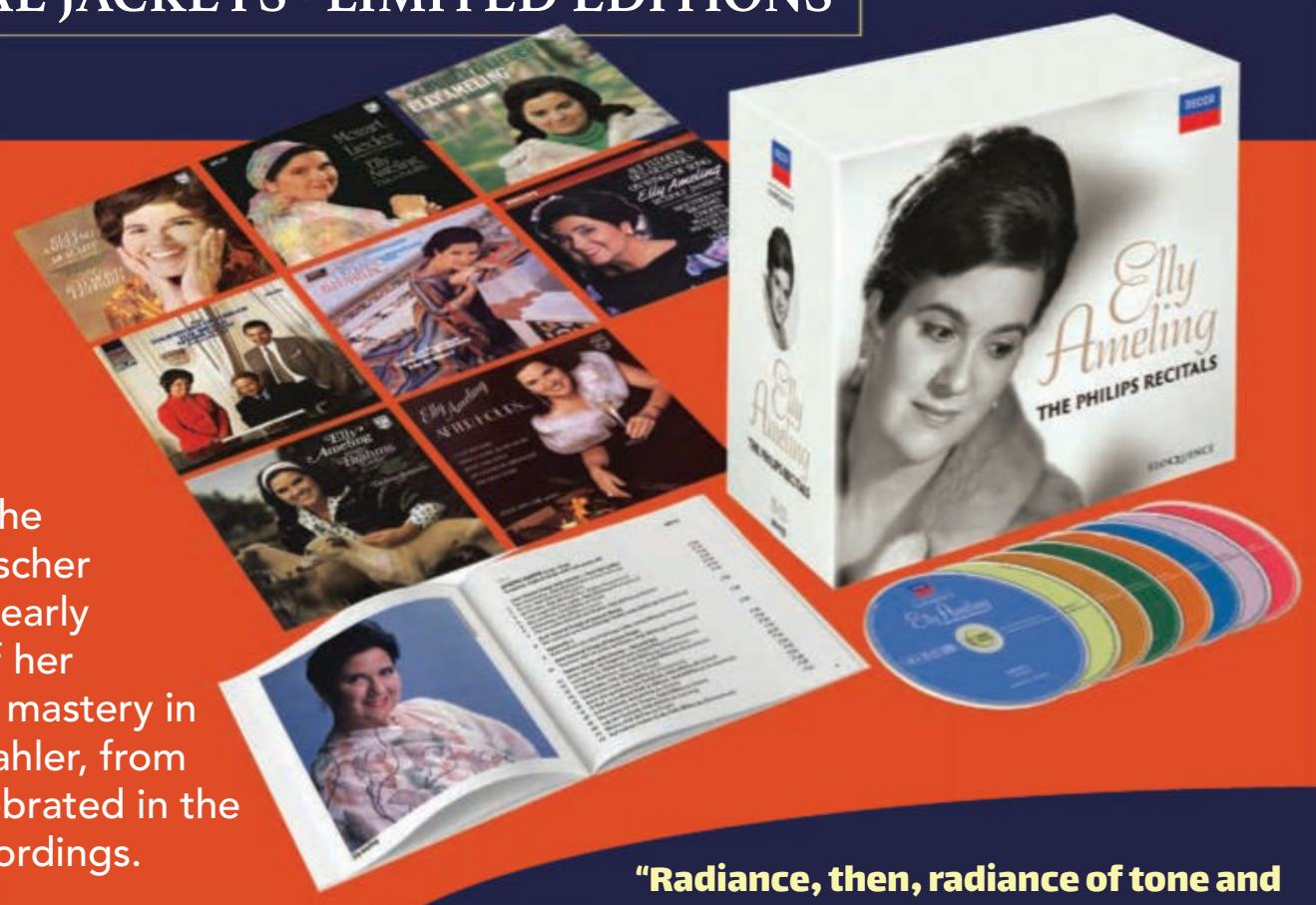

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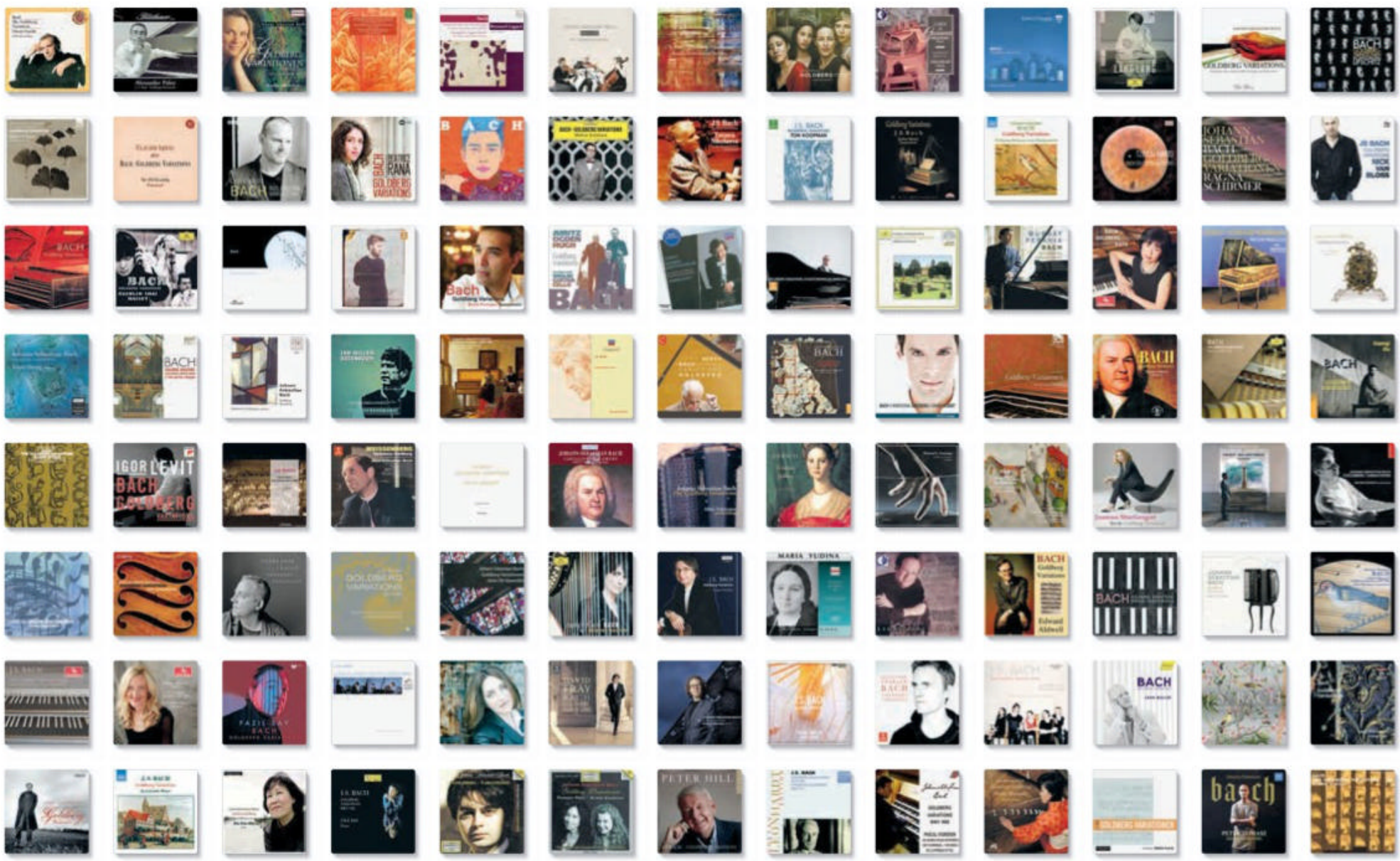

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